QUALITY BILL'S GIRL

CHARLES W. TYLER

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Quality Bill's Girl

A Detective Story

By CHARLES W. TYLER

CHELSEA HOUSE
79 SEVENTH AVENUE NEW YORK CITY

Quality Bill's Girl

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QUALITY BILL'S GIRL

CHAPTER I

RAGGEDY ANN

WEST northwest ten miles, as the dividers step off the distance, the winking eyes of the lights of the metropolis are dimly discernible from that dot in the sea which is the cold, bleak, surf-rimmed mass of rock that is Raggedy Ann Island.

To the north, at the far edge of the dim horizon, faint points of illumination, spaced at regular intervals, mark a famous North Shore drive; to the east only a blank, fathomless expanse of impenetrable night, which is punctuated at measured beats of six seconds' spacing by the steady, powerful flash of the Graves; to the south, other far pricks of distant shore lights trailing the base of a highly arched headland.

No more desolate spot than Raggedy Ann is to be found for miles—a jutting, savage mass of rock which is thrust up from low-lying, half-submerged ledges to an elevation of some seventy-five or a hundred feet, while bounding it round about are treacherous shoals, sunken rocks, and ugly tide rips. The famous Roaring Bulls, the Devil's Back, arching and ugly, visible only at low tide, Half Tide Rocks, Hypocrite Channel—all go to make Raggedy Ann a spot in a rugged coast ranking in dread areas with the far-famed Norman's Woe down Gloucester way.

Awesome, specterlike, with its round dome looming above the smashing white of her booming surf, Raggedy Ann cuddled against the bleak and thickening gray of a November sky, while for a hurtling instant a speck of light played against the western surface of its old bald head—the only sign the island gave of human habitation.

Long since winds and weather have played havoc with the two roughly constructed, boxlike shacks which in some bygone day had temporarily sheltered fishermen or lobstermen of other times. The windows were broken and the sash splintered. Through the roofs were nicks and rips where rains crept in. The doors hung by one hinge, or none. Must and dampness were on the interior walls, while sodden papers and rubbish filled the corners.

A bit of rag slapped from one of the two spindling masts which were range marks long established. The dreary bleakness of the place was complete.

Yet from one of those two battered structures halfway up the cliff a flicker of light had appeared.

Raggedy Ann was tenanted. Some human being was there in the face of coming night and a November blow. Also, riding at anchor in the gourd-shaped neck of an ill-protected bit of cove which dented the northerly shore, a drab-colored power boat, equipped with a short auxiliary mast and jib stay, swung with her teeth in the chop that was rolling off the Devil's Back.

From one of the huts a figure appeared—a woman. She was alone. Swiftly she shot a last calculating glance about her, pausing half irresolutely; then made her way quickly and surely over the western

wall of the rock, sprang lightly down a bit of terraced ledge, and, with a sure, easy stride, swung along the stony beach toward a small, sturdy dinghy that was pulled up out of reach of the surf.

With little apparent effort she pointed its nose out into the boiling water, waited for several damaging rollers to break, and then caught a dead one and pushed off. Her skillful, short, choppy strokes were proof that she was perfectly at home in this surly sea.

Deftly she spun the dinghy under the lee of the larger boat, flashed the oars clear, caught the painter, and was scrambling aboard before the sole male occupant of the motor craft was aware of her presence in the vicinity.

He started awkwardly to help her now.

"Aw, why didn't yeh holler?" he said.

The girl ignored the interrogation. With two quick movements she took a hitch on the stern cleat, fastening the dinghy securely.

"Get up that hook, Shanghai!" she commanded sharply.

The man—known as the "Shanghai Kid"—hurried to obey; the woman jammed open the after hatch over the engine.

As sure and self-reliant as were her movements on shore and in the handling of the dinghy, just so sure was her application to the complications of this two-cylinder, heavy-duty gasoline marine engine. There was no waiting to try the supposedly contrary animal before the hook came out of the mud. The woman knew the old kicker too well for that.

She pushed open the gas cock, snapped back the

compression and priming cocks, fed the latter a couple of smells of gasoline, sucked a little air, closed them—and over she went. There was a sputter and a roar. The man in the bow struggled to get the anchor clear, there was a boiling pool of white at the stern as the propeller raced into action, and the boat shot out into the open sea.

The woman set up the spark and gave the needle valve a slight turn to the left, screwed down the grease cups, and closed the hatch. An instant later she was at the wheel.

The man coiled the anchor line and joined his companion in the cockpit. The woman was tense, alert; he was furtive, distrustful of the sea and the coming storm.

The night enveloped them. The water was ugly. The man did not like it. He said:

"Which way yeh goin' in this blank blasted blackness?"

"Up through Gran Banan. It's the only way we can get in without a patrol boat nailing us."

"Th' bloody f'rsaken wasps! An' there ain't no range lights or nothin'—j'st take a chance an' trust yeh don't hit nothin' up through that way. A tide rip an' a bunch uh snorty ledges. Ugh! Cursed wind!"

The boat stuck her nose into a white-capped roller, and a deluge of salty water showered across the craft. The man got it full in the face. The woman saw it and was prepared—sticking her head down and letting it slant off her sou'wester and oilskins; but she did not budge from the wheel.

The man swore and crouched behind the low cabin.

Another huge sea flung its crested curtain of ice-cold water over them.

"My Lord, what sort uh unholy wash are we goin' into? Me f'r a land game. I'll take my chances with th' bulls ashore, thank yeh, after this. Who'd thought it was goin' t' blow a livin' gale right off the bat? Hear that surf out there some place ahead of yuh!"

Another wall of water sent its compliments aboard.

"Shut up!" blazed the woman suddenly, her patience exhausted. "You're worse than an old granny. It always blows out here in November; you've got to expect it. This isn't anything to what we'll get later on. Go on! Get inside and tell it to the admiral."

Alone, the woman once more turned her face back through the gloom toward the dim outline of Raggedy Ann.

The things she saw there of to-morrow were reflected in the sudden flash of light in her eyes. But only for an instant were they turned behind her. Her work now was the thing she loved most of all—to fight the wind and sea, gloriously to battle her way up through the treacherous shoals and tide race of Gran Banan Channel, in the face of this pitch-black night.

Her boat was running without lights. She must dodge harbor police and patrols of the S. P. fleet, clear Shoal End Lighthouse, pick her way through Charity Rock Channel beyond the Narrows, pick up spar buoy No. 3 off Hospital Shoals, and lay

a course through the thick gloom dead west-northwest one point west till she had left gas buoy No. 10 off the southwest end of Bird Island Flats to starboard. The rest then was easy.

The hidden jetty at Driscoll's made, it would be the lights and safety and warmth of the underworld, where she could trace her thoughts and plans back to the compelling majesty of the boom of the surf and the night noises of Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER II

AN INHERITANCE

OLD "Quality" Bill Race died the other day. He left on earth a daughter, and good will toward none—save her.

Circumstances had created the "Quality" prefix, while declining years placed before it further definition of the man himself. William Race had known little of peace on earth since the passing into the unknown of his beloved wife, who in the agony of that going left for her husband's solace a baby girl.

Now in his turn old Bill passed on to the world of his trials and tribulations a creature beautiful in these years of her rounding into full-blown young womanhood—Blue Jean Billy Race.

For reasons best known to himself the old man had always called the girl "Blue Jean." Later, in associations with people other than the kind her good mother had known, she was referred to as Quality Bill's girl, which in time became "Blue Jean Billy"—a moniker that was to become famous in the channels of the underworld.

In the moments of wild grief which was the man's when his helpmate passed west over the Long Road, he placed the mite of noisy pink in the care of a good nursery, while for himself he chose the lonely places of the coast and plied the trade of fisherman.

In later years, when Blue Jean had finished with school, she spent much of her time on the water with her father, where she learned the love of the sea. Here she was taught all those things of boats and winds and currents that Bill Race knew.

Then came that black period when, in the raid of illegal seiners in the waters of a river's mouth, an official of the State was killed by a bullet from a gun in the hands of one of the outlaw fishermen. In the general confusion which followed, several of the boats and their crews escaped.

In strange channels with which there is no concern here, old Bill Race was arrested on suspicion of knowing something of the affair that he was attempting to keep under his hat.

During the old-fashioned third degree that followed, a zealous officer outdid himself just a little. Half through rage, half through accident, there was a slip, a wrenching fall—and Quality Bill Race, crook, was made.

The bit of ugly consequence of that scene "up on the hill" had disfigured the fisherman for life. From that moment there in the "front office," even though he was "turned out" so far as any connection with the crime was concerned, he was embittered toward all things that had to do with the police. He became a desperate, clever, and crafty criminal, and rightly earned the sobriquet of "Quality Bill."

His work had always been big stuff, in a class which set it definitely beyond that of the ordinary crook. He had been a "scratch man," "big-mitt man," "peterman," and in all of these he had been

so shrewd and daring that none could compare with old Bill, till the hop got him.

In his life in the underworld the girl still was with him. She never deserted him. Again he taught her all he knew—not of the sea and the big, clean things, but of the muck and gutter wash of this life below the dead line.

Then came that night when old Quality Bill Race laid aside the cares of this life and turned his face to the wall for the last time.

In those last fading moments he called the girl.

"Jean," he had murmured haltingly, "old Bill Race is goin' west t'-night—goin' acrost th' river. Jeanie, I allus hoped I'd see th' time when yeh was a real lady, when I'd lift yeh up instead uh draggin' yeh down, but th' luck didn't break with us. It's one Quality Bill foozled.

"I'm leavin' yeh t' hate th' bulls an' despise th' right. It ain't much uh a inheritance I'm settlin' on yeh. It ain't th' teachin's th'—th' Gawd yeh mother knew would 'a' taught. No, it ain't.

"I'm tired now, Jean, girl—dead tired, somehow. I guess I gotta take a rest afore I go on. I gotta sleep; I'm drowsy. But—but make a lady uh yehself —some time—Jeanie—like yeh mother was. You're good—I've taught yeh th' crooked game—Gawd f'rgive me—but yeh ain' like them other women. Thank 'Im f'r that.

"In spite uh—uh th' hell I dragged yeh to, be th' Blue Jean Billy yeh—yeh mother'd want t' see. Th-that's all. That's—all——"

And Blue Jean Billy Race was alone with all that had been Quality Bill—that and her inheritance.

CHAPTER III

AN UNINVITED GUEST

THE big house on the hill at "Four Hundred Acre" was the abiding place of much illumination, of much merriment, of great rejoicing. The doings of the evening were the climax of an event which was of widespread publicity in general, and mutual advantage to the principals of the contract in particular. The thing was a complete strategic victory—or something like that—for a mommer who had been a long time trying to get the thing across.

Muriel de Vanderflip had taken unto herself a male of the species, who labored under the handicap of Algernon Whosis Pinagree Smythe. They were hitched, to the accompaniment of much red wine and song, while many fine ladies, dressed more or less in pleasant expressions and twinkly gadgets—which same collectively were worth a king's ransom and then a few—had gathered to give the affair the right color in the society columns.

The whole blow-out promised to be a grand success. The gifts on exhibition were rich and wonderful, the jewel display alone being worth a fabulous sum.

In the arched and elaborately festooned reception hall a flat-footed dick cocked an eye at the clock and wondered if he came in for any of the swell eats, or maybe did he just listen to the music while he main-

tained an eagle eye on the array of junk of which he was the patrol fleet.

The knot for the Long Hike had been tied tighter than a Gilligan hitch, and the big feed was in progress. It was going strong at the eleventh round, and there were still some to go. It was a little after eleven o'clock, and the dick was beginning to talk softly to himself about dull care and swell rocks and food values.

Then somewhere from beyond a row of languid tropic palms a bit of cool air fanned his cheek. The long leaves of the *Palmaceæ* stirred uneasily. There was a chafe of a sash rubbing the casing; then a soft rustle.

Something akin to a creepy premonition trickled along the back of the dick's neck. He had known that kind of a sensation before. People call it a hunch—and other things.

Bill Gillane—that was the copper's handle—called it one now, while his right hand automatically registered preparedness. But nothing happened; that is, nothing much.

A young woman in an evening gown that was a corker stepped into view from the direction of the bay window. The work of the dressmaking art, however, was shaded several ways by the bloom of loveliness which it graced. She was one of those persons who would appear equally charming in either princess satin or calico.

Her hair was a wavy chestnut, or would have been if it had not been so strictly enforced in stately, high-knotted harmony; there was the flush of a healthy tan on her face and consequent faint border lines at

throat and forearms, which carefully applied flesh-tinted powder did not quite conceal; her eyes were gray, and they could be very soft or very hard in a shifting flash; her body was strong and lithe, every move gave hint of steely muscles, of perfect synchronism; each movement was timed, and there was no lost motion.

One thing was stamped on her. She was bred to the great outdoors—its freedom, its suns and rains, its battles and its solace. Something else was there, too; but that was less clearly defined; it was faint, yet sinister.

Nevertheless, she was about the swellest bit of feminine loveliness that Mr. Gillane had seen in a long time—and she was coming straight toward him, her lips puckered in a pouting little smile, and her gray eyes soft, half questioning.

For a moment she paused, her lids widening in sudden frank astonishment at the array of glittering cut-glass ware, silver, and jewels before her. But it was only for a fleeting fraction of time; then slowly her gaze shifted, till, through the stately corridor at her right, with its massive columns of the ancient order of architecture, she could see the great dining room, ablaze with its lights and bubbling with its gayety.

The woman, after a moment of swift survey, again advanced in the direction of Mr. Gillane, sweeping the train of her gown majestically behind her as she squared away on her course toward the perplexed dick.

"Oh-h!" she breathed at length. "Aren't they be-e-autiful? Wonderful!"

She was looking straight past Mr. Gillane now. Her eyes were riveted on the flaunting display of jewelers' art there in its little kingdom of hidden lights. Her hands clasped at her bodice, she bent slightly forward. So intent was her gaze that the dick involuntarily half turned his head.

"Yea-ah, they was swell gadgets, all right; but they wan't good to eat."

It was only for the fraction of an instant that his eyes were off the woman before he jerked his head back. There had been a sudden, soft movement that had come to him out of the corner of his eye. But that moment his eyes were away was enough.

Detective Gillane was looking straight into the business end of an automatic gat. If there was ever other-world fire in the eyes of a female, surely it was blazing now in those gray orbs of the woman before him.

Her whole being had undergone a swift and almost unbelievable change. Warmth and sunshine were at once transmuted into blued steel. When next she spoke, her words were snapped off in short, crude phrasings:

"Stick 'em up!"

Bill Gillane raised his hands mechanically. His mind had been too busily engaged trying to arrange a satisfactory general summing up of the whys and hows of the lady's appearance at this unexpected moment to form emergency or strategic plans on behalf of the treasure behind him.

Some men think first and act later, and some men act first and do their thinking in the hospital. As our

friend from downtown belonged to the former group, there was no tragedy at the outset.

"Turn around!"

Again Mr. Gillane obeyed, and was at once relieved of his revolver, also of one pair of bracelets.

"Take your hands down and hold them out behind you." The woman's voice carried back of it something infinitely grim. She went on: "I've got you covered, and this gat works quick. No noise now; not a yip or a scratch!"

She snapped the handcuffs about the officer's wrists with her left hand; always her right was ready with the automatic.

"Get on the floor! Back of that cornfield plot! Face down!"

She gagged him savagely, and with his own handkerchief, knotted in the middle and jammed between his teeth, while a deft reef knot, unmercifully tight, was jerked into shape at the back of his neck. A bit of corded drapery did the trick as far as his feet were concerned. Well learned in her trade was this woman, strong and wonderfully quick.

She was sheltered by the thick foliage of potted plants and heavy jetting pilasters. Her entrance from the bay of the huge window, whence she had effected her unchallenged admission and the scene which followed, had been hidden from the eyes of the servants and the guests alike.

Without a second glance at the recumbent form of Mr. Gillane, the youthful Miss Raffles gave her immediate attention to whatever sparkling bric-a-brac and trinkets of exceptional value her expert eye ap-

praised as worth her while. Swiftly and surely she picked the sheep from the goats, so to speak.

A chamois bag received them—diamond gewgaws that would have dazzled Solomon, pearls almost without price, combinations of precious stones that would have made a mission stiff a miserable backslider from the first flash.

From first to last, the thing had happened far quicker than it could be told; but this was not the end. Events followed swiftly.

The twelfth course of the feast in honor of the bride was starting off with much gusto, for not a few had looked upon the wine when it was red and the champagne when it was full of pep. There were toasts to the bride and not a boost for the Smythe guy—which is not uncommon—and everybody felt that the world was a great place to live in.

No one noted the entrance of the uninvited guest in that first moment of her appearance through the shaded ways from the room beyond. No one of the fine people who were gathered in the huge banquet room could have told afterward who of them was the first to see—or perhaps we should say feel—that presence of the woman.

There was a sudden hush, a wave of unsignaled quiet, which swept over the diners. The soft strains of the music in its secluded retreat in a festooned balcony continued to whine its plaintive melody. The strains of it were at once enhanced twofold because of the cessation of the buzz of conversation and the clink of dishes.

A woman, beautiful in all that goes to make a creature of grace and charm, was standing silently

against a background of heavy velvet portières, immensely rich in their loose folds of deep red. Her head was tilted forward just a little; her body was weighted on her left foot and balanced by her right, which threw her lithe form bending slightly back from the waist.

For that long moment which always drags interminably at times of hair-hung intermission of the movements of fate, the lady studied her audience. She despised them; she held them in utter contempt. They were the enemies of the poor; the friends of the police, whom their money could buy and sell in the kind of a barter she knew all too well. They were wasters. Solomon had the right dope.

Her steely gray eyes told it all as she cast them over the grand people gathered before her. Then she smiled—a saucy, twisted little smirk. Her voice, when she spoke, was low, yet keen and clear.

"Wellyo!" She canted the muzzle of the automatic just a bit upward. "Don't by any means let *me* interfere with you and your cute little band. Go on! And give us something soft and dreamy." Then she added dryly: "Music is soothing to the nerves—and it looks like maybe some of our fair guests will need a tonic."

William de Vanderflip, gray and stately in father's best, suddenly discovered that, as the boss around the diggings, it was up to him to make a few inquiries. He jammed back his chair and stood erect.

"Madam," he boomed sternly, "what is the meaning of this ridiculous masquerade? Put down that gun! George"—addressing one of the plaster of Paris images in uniform—"call that detective!"

The eyebrows of the woman twitched up in arched playfulness, while a challenging bolt of fire was shot at Mr. de Vanderflip following the mocking gesture.

"The first meaning of my appearance here is that if you or your friend George so much as bat an eye during the remainder of my stay, I'll shoot that swell rock out of the middle of your Sunday-go-to-meeting shirt, to say nothing of what I'll trim off the statue's uniform. So let's try and keep this little affair entirely free of anything that might reflect on our good name—and prove injurious to our health."

Her voice was soft and apologetic when she went on:

"I'm *so* sorry I have kept you waiting. I meant to have been here sooner, but my chauffeur did not know the way. Also, the gentleman in the reception hall was an old friend of mine, and I stopped to ask concerning his health and the missus. I know you'll pardon me; I can see it in your faces.

"Now I'll only keep you just a few minutes. Please assist me all you can. Be generous, and think of the good you are doing. Your ornaments, ladies. I know I'll not have to ask the gentlemen."

She was moving majestically toward the banquet table, friendliness taking the place of the glitter in her eyes—but pent-up hell leering up and down the feasters from her right hand. Smoldering panic was in the air. The very audacity of the thing had taken men and women alike off their feet. No one doubted for an instant but that this cold, calculating woman was in deadly earnest. There was that about her which held the victims in grim, relentless awe of this

splendid creature who was dressed as one of their own.

"Servants, please stand beneath the musicians' balcony," again it was the voice of the field marshal, "face to the wall. Each of the rest of you as I pass behind your chairs will remove your jewels and drop them into this bag. Any attempt to give an alarm or otherwise interrupt this program will only result in personal injury. That's all.

"Yes, you may turn around. That's it. I think it will hold them all. Be careful; don't tear your shirt. The clasp? It bothers? Your hands are trembling; the gentleman next to you will loosen it. Why, isn't that awful? He's got the jigs, too."

So it went the whole way around the huge table. Few words were spoken. Women cringed and shrank away from that cold, black muzzle of the ever-present gat, and they were not alone; the men were no braver. If any had hero inclinations, they were quickly squelched by the blue ice which glittered in the eyes of the fascinating outlaw.

True, Mrs. de Vanderflip fainted plumb away, while her better half squirmed and fumed and swore under his breath, and Muriel started several emotion acts which went dry for want of lubrication, and Pinagree Smythe got the blind staggers. Nevertheless, the lady behind the gun concluded her performance in a manner remarkably quiet.

Then, as quick as a play of light, the lady of mystery had swept her trailing train of satin about her and moved to one of the huge mullioned windows at the far side of the room. Here she paused for just

an instant, while her eyes turned once more in swift survey of the guests at the banquet table.

The black automatic was gone from her right hand, and in its place was the bulging chamois bag, while her left hand clutched that miserable long train free of her feet. There was a trace of a humorous flash in those gray eyes, a bit of reflected ivory from the even white teeth as a smile hovered there for an instant, the sweep of the window, a blast of cold air —and this daring adventuress of the night had faded into the gloom.

Almost in an instant she had passed on toward those channels of escape in the underworld she knew so well.

At the curb beyond the green carpet of the wide-bordering lawn the woman calmly signaled a purring motor, and, as it shot up beside her, vaulted quickly into the inclosed rear of the machine. There was a jarring crash of gears, and the car was flying down the avenue.

Even before it had left the curb, a disheveled and frantic Mr. Gillane, together with several gesticulating males in evening harness, burst through the front door and sprinted inelegantly in a pursuit that was more noisy and cautious than imbued with a definite idea of getting too close to the lady yegg.

Next to Mr. Gillane in this event was Algernon Whosis Pinagree Smythe. Somebody had to make a showing for the family—the whole blooming thing would be in the papers—and Pinagree being a lion hunter by proclamation, and a devil in the eyes of the women, why, naturally, it was up to him to get busy.

The alarm spread as fast as nimble-fingered operators could plug their numbers. The front office got it; then the outlying stations. In the meantime Mr. Smythe and Mr. Gillane—in the former's racy roadster—climbed out in red-hot pursuit of that swaying, lurching car that was just darting around the corner ahead.

Far out on the edge of the black Atlantic the white-crested surf pounded ceaselessly at the base of the island of last resort—of Raggedy Ann—while between was the city, alive with its scurrying harness bulls and dickie birds and stool pigeons, and inhabited by a vindictive Bill Gillane, who was in a sordid state of mind, together with a suddenly valiant Algernon Smythe.

The game was on, the pursuit boiling into a swift and savage vortex that had but a common objective—Blue Jean Billy Race, dressed in ball-room finery, possessed of a chamois bag that contained jewels which were almost without price, and with just two blocks' start.

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE STRATEGY

THE slower-moving car ahead was no match for the high-powered racer which Mr. Smythe was driving. From the first it was apparent that, so far as a get-away in the car she had chosen was concerned, Blue Jean Billy had no chance—not a Chinaman's. The time would only be a matter of minutes before it was either surrender or fight.

A few blocks from the De Vanderflip home a hoofer on his beat, attracted by the speeding machines, got himself into a second-gear shift and galloped from a side street in time to catch the eye of Mr. Gillane, who promptly ordered that they take on reënforcements while the taking was good.

Pinagree thought a lot of this arrangement. There was a wild, skidding, slackening, a nimble-footed finger-flatty stumbled onto the footboard, a crash of gears—and they were off again.

Next to being a handsome guy, the best thing that Algy did was to get seven miles more out of a benzine wagon than the builders dreamed there was in the old bus.

The fugitive car ahead plugged straight downtown, turning neither to the right nor the left. This was great graft for the hounds. They ate it up. But even at that the first machine was hitting on 'em all. With a downgrade to help her on her way, there was

nothing very slack about the manner in which she cuffed dust from the high spots.

Some blocks had been covered before Algernon had inched up half of the intervening distance. The hoofer unlimbered his artillery and started popping at the spinning tires of the volatile craft down yonder.

Then something happened.

The pursued car swerved sharply, careened around a corner a little less than nothing clear of a telegraph pole, and—for the merest fraction of time—was lost to sight of the officers and Mr. Smythe behind.

The thing was done so quickly that the hurtling machine following, not being possessed of the power to predetermine the course of their quarry, found themselves buckling past the sharp turn taken by the first auto. Yet even in that instant there was a startling crash, while less than a block away on their right the other machine tottered drunkenly, as its rear wheels slued the top-heavy body over and broadside into an ugly mass of wreckage against the wall of a driveway.

One tiny flaw in this scene passed unnoticed in the moment's excitement—the fact that, considering the headway it had attained—even allowing for the slackening at the turn—car number one was nearer the corner of the main thoroughfare which it had just left than under all existing conditions it should have been.

Only when the alert cunning of the woman was again brought vividly home to Bill Gillane did he discover this error of time and place in the seeming catastrophe so short a way down that side street.

Even as Mr. Smythe was sliding his racer to the curb, the dick and the hoofer were darting in the direction of the wrecked automobile. Algernon W., however, his car just out of the range of vision of any one gazing from the vicinity of the disaster, and for reasons best known to himself, chose not to follow the officers. He wasn't going to get into any brawls without a little heavy thinking.

To trace the footsteps of Mr. Gillane and the policeman: They churned into the picture, all ready for anything that might pop. But nothing broke loose. Immediately they took counsel. The first error of conclusion can be credited to the detective; the second to the harness bull.

"The woman must be caught under the machine," said the elbow. "I think I can see a piece of her gown."

"Gad! Th' chowfer got it, too," said the cop. "Th' ol' hearse rolled on top of 'im."

Both were wrong. Neither Blue Jean Billy nor "Shaver" Michael, the driver of the car, were under the wreckage. Further than that—outside of a bit of flimsy scarf which Bill Gillane had mistaken for a portion of the dress worn by the uninvited guest—there was absolutely no trace of either the mysterious girl crook and her rich loot, or of her pal. They were just plain gone!

So, also—as the two officers discovered a few minutes later—was Algernon Whosis P. Smythe and his roadster, and just as mysteriously.

CHAPTER V

THE DICKS GET BUSY

IN the morning, every paper in town blossomed out with the news of the startling, bold robbery in the home of the De Vanderflips; while in less bold type they echoed the news of the disappearance of the bridegroom, and the subsequent hysterical outbursts of the bride; then went into more or less detail concerning the value of the stolen jewels.

The front office had very little to say. They were, however, everlastingly busy. It was a case for the best they had. The strange part of it was that no one could seem to dope out just exactly who the high-class performer might be.

Too, there were several other little angles to the thing that put the stunt altogether out of the class ordinary. Headquarters looked them all over and summed them up, and put two seasoned lieutenants on the job—Wolfe and McKinnon.

William de Vanderflip, nevertheless, was not satisfied. His home had been violated; his guests robbed, and, worse than that, a perfectly good wedding feast "busted up" by some brazen female of a type which had never before shone in the heavens of his little old world.

Then, to knock the spots off anything of a previous nature, daughter Muriel had lost her man in the shuffle. No. Mr. de Vanderflip, being of his make-

up composed of about equal parts guncotton and dynamite, couldn't stand for that at all, and, as money talks, his roll let out an awful holler.

He advertised in all the dailies of the city, heading the insertion with a reward offered of twenty-five hundred dollars for any information that would lead to the recovery of the jewels. Below this he tacked on an additional offer of twenty-five hundred dollars' reward for information leading to the arrest of the woman. This entirely independent of certain descriptive insertions furnished by the big international detective agency to whom he had turned for assistance. Their advertisement was more exhaustive, and included reference to Algernon W. P. Smythe, who, as has been stated, was missing.

In conjunction with these developments this famous agency for the detection and apprehension of criminals placed one of their shrewdest man hunters on the case—a keen, clean-cut fellow who had a large range of knowledge of the underworld's crooks; a man of thirty-five, well built and muscular, while neither muscle nor fat went to make up the inside of his skull.

Robert Wood was just a plain, all-around he-man, with eyes that saw and ears that heard and a brain that could get more combinations out of two and two than the next best hundred in the thousand.

"The quickest and surest way to get a line on this thing," Robert Wood told the peppery Mr. de Vanderflip, "is to advertise. Get the thing into the papers and mention a reward, no questions asked, and seven times out of ten some yellow rat will come out of the underworld with a tip. There may be honor among

thieves, but that doesn't apply to the two-faced scum that make their living by selling out their fellow men. Of course, we're taking it for granted that Mr. Smythe somehow met with foul play."

"If it wasn't for my daughter, sir," cried the pugnacious William de Vanderflip, "they could keep the fool, and to blazes with them. Why in all creation he had to go and get mixed up with it I can't for the life of me make out. He's a boob, anyway, and the first thing you know they will be trying to hold me up for a reward for his return. Bah!"

"Yes," admitted the detective, half smiling; "that is not impossible. And if they do?"

"Ten dollars!" yelled the magnate of State Street. "Ten dollars, sir! That's my limit! If he never comes back, there's a lot more where he came from, and on a second shot I might have the good fortune to get something with a nickel's worth of brains and a little pep in him."

"But your daughter may think differently," suggested the other. "She picked him out, didn't she?"

"No!" Mr. de Vanderflip crabbed explosively. "Her mother brought it into the fold! She's traced him back to a first mate on the *Mayflower*, or something. He's had a nursemaid to look out for him all his life; now if he's got himself into trouble by jamming off into something where he's over his head, let him swim out."

"Then we'll say or do nothing about the young man for the present," said Robert Wood. "We'll go right ahead with this thing as a straight robbery case, and if kidnaping really develops later, why, perhaps we will have a little more to work on in connection with

both. We will let the other side spring it first, if such is their intention. Is that the idea?"

"That's it!" snapped Mr. de Vanderflip. "That's it!"

"Very well," acknowledged the dick. "Outside of the reference we have already made to Mr. Smythe in our advertisements, for information concerning his whereabouts, we will do nothing."

"Yes," cautioned the client, "but if you have any conversation with either my wife or Muriel, kindly exercise due discretion. You understand what I mean?"

"It is perfectly clear," Mr. Wood hastened to assert soberly. "You may trust me, I think. And now I'll take a little turn around town and see what's doing. You will hear from me later. Good day."

"Goo' day! Goo' day!"

CHAPTER VI

ALGERNON GOES DOWNTOWN

NOW we've got to go back and get A. W. Pīnagree Smythe up with the procession.

He had been alone scarcely a minute after Bill Gillane and the hoofer hastened around the corner in the direction of the wrecked automobile which they had been pursuing when, from a low, thick hedge just across the ragged suburban sidewalk close on his right, a quick dark figure glided.

So swiftly and so unexpectedly did it appear that practically all Mr. Smythe remembered was a black-mouthed gat staring him straight in the face, while a voice beyond grimly admonished him concerning perfect quiet. Algernon could very readily understand how necessary it was for him to choke that wild inclination to holler. His mouth flopped open in surprise and clapped shut in absolute acquiescence.

An instant later a woman joined the gentleman with the gun. Algernon saw her out of the corner of his eye. A mannish soft felt was crowded down over her hair. She wore a trench coat of heavy tweed, which was buttoned close about her throat, and reached to the top of a pair of heavy shoes that were not laced. This latter fact, however, Algy did not observe till a few minutes later; then he wondered at it, for he had caught no resemblance between this person and the uninvited guest.

The woman carried a small leather bag. Without a word, she slipped into the machine beside Mr. Smythe, and at once went to work lacing up those gaping boots. Up to this moment her time had been very much taken up. Beneath her coat she still wore the princess satin gown, the same in which she had graced the premises of the De Vanderflips.

Her companion stepped to the running board of the car, balancing himself with his left hand, while with his right he pressed the muzzle of his rod into the small of Algernon's ice-cold back.

"A' right," he croaked in the other's ear. "Let 'em in easy, an' take us downtown. Slide out uh here just as pink quiet as th' Lord'll let yeh. That's th' stuff. Soft on th' shift now. Ah-h, that's th' candy."

Blue Jean Billy straightened up and looked back. She sniffed contemptuously.

"Holy Mack! The mutts fell for it, and left a machine for us right where it couldn't have been any nicer. A gift—and a nice little man to run it."

She shot a glance at Algernon. Instantly she recognized him. Blue Jean Billy sat right up straight.

"Pansy Malone! Shaver, we've got the bridegroom!"

"How much's he worth? Could we hock 'im down t' uncle's?"

"He's worth just exactly what those swells out on the hill want to give to get him back," said the businesslike Billy, without a moment's hesitation.

Mr. Smythe gasped. He'd heard of such things, but he had always supposed they existed merely in the elastic skulls of the fiction-writing populace. And

yet, merciful Heaven, here *he* was kidnaped and everything.

Shaver Michael caught his breath for a moment, too. The thing was big. He had helped study out and survey the looting stunt until it was all ironed out in his mind, but to have something like this bob into the setting without a murmur of warning was like planking his bare foot on a piece of ice in the dark. It made him stagger. His mind had to adjust itself to the new wrinkle.

Shaver's gear works were lightning quick in some lines, and sluggish in others. Perhaps, too, his nerves were not quite steadied down after that stunt at the turn, when he had slued his lunging machine into the side street, and then, on the exact instant that for the flash of time they were out of sight of the pursuing car, jammed on the brakes sufficiently for that momentary slackening of speed which had allowed himself and Blue Jean Billy time to jump clear of the automobile before sending it straight at that wall.

The short dash following the departure from the De Vanderflip home had allowed the woman time to slip into her coat, kick off the pumps, and crowd the chamois bag and excess clothing into the black hand bag. The strategic maneuver in the side street had been planned for just such an emergency, and they had put it over.

From almost a noiseless start, the machine containing this strange trio continued in the direction of the downtown district at a moderate pace. Blue Jean Billy wanted a chance to think. There was nothing so very unusual about a roadster wending its way cityward with a quietly dressed lady passenger beside

the driver, while an extra gentleman roosted on the footboard on the left side, his left hand cocked amicably back of the chauffeur's spinal column.

So far as the third party on the roadster went, it might have been a good Samaritan act, or just giving a guy a lift between "owl" cars, or almost any old thing.

Winding, twisting, turning, Blue Jean Billy directed Mr. Algernon Smythe along little-frequented thoroughfares till, when at last they approached the city proper, they were traveling almost at right angles to the direction that would have otherwise brought them from the aristocratic outlying district where the De Vanderflips resided.

The car was neither challenged, nor did it attract undue attention. Straight into the heart of the city it passed. By the time that Bill Gillane and the patrolman had tumbled to the ruse of which they were the victims, Blue Jean Billy and Mr. Michael and Mr. Smythe and the roadster had again faded into the maze of the world Blue Jean knew the best.

All too late came the frantic appeal of Mr. Gillane to be on the lookout for a roadster registered under the name of Algernon W. P. Smythe, and in all probability being driven by the same gentleman, who, when last seen, was in evening dress and without a hat—a roadster whose other occupants would probably be a gentleman, unknown, and a woman of unusual beauty, who, also, when last seen, had been attired in evening dress, and in whose possession were jewels enough to break the bank of Monte Carlo, were they represented in cash.

CHAPTER VII

PARASITES

IT was not alone in the police circles that activities were great following the daring robbery at the De Vanderflip place. No sooner was the news of the thing thrown to the public than several picturesque gentlemen of the underworld and two ladies of the lower criminal strata started to inject considerable spice into a campaign to see if they couldn't devise ways and means whereby they, too, would profit by the affair.

All down the scale of animal life, or of vegetable life, for that matter, there are animals and plants which live solely by the nourishment they obtain from another animal or another plant. They are parasites. The name is all that it implies.

The underworld reeks and squirms with them. They are too rotten, their brains too murky, to make clever crooks; yet they are not without cunning or courage of a kind.

Of such were that little circle of men and women who sat crowded around a rickety table in the rear of that blind-pig joint known as "Mike, the Barber's," place.

There were "Mulatto Baldy" Johnson, "Blinky" George, "Jersey Pete," the shark hunter, "Baron, the Wop," "Charlestown" Lottie, and "Diamond" Jenny, who at one time had been higher in the game than she was to-day.

One subject held the attention of them all—the robbery at the De Vanderflips'. They, too, were puzzling over the identity of the woman bandit, so described as having the beauty of a thoroughbred and the poise of a queen.

"I can't make it. I can't make it." Blinky George jabbered in his quick, nervous manner of speech. "I t'ought I wuz hep to 'em all in dis burg, an' their style. I t'ought I wuz. Mus' be suthin' imported—prob'ly fr'm N'Yawk."

"You an' yeh thoughts ain't got nuthin' on th' rest of us, I guess," said Lottie. "We'd all maybe like to know 'em. Eh, Jen?"

Then Jen, so addressed, admitted as much, and injected other spicy comment into the conversation anent the grievous ways and workings of her evil mind.

Five hundred dollars cash would have bought the entire group for anything from open murder to selling their souls. Five thousand—and the sky was the limit, with no restrictions or rules of warfare. All codes were barred. Everything went—hitting below the belt in the clinches, the strangle hold, and all the worm stuff their rum courage could stir them up to pull off.

Mulatto Baldy bought a round of drinks.

The ladies and gentlemen present lapped up a little inspiration, and lit a coffin nail a piece.

"M-m, an' won't th' dickie birds be flyin' 'round 'n' 'round fast f'r a w'ile?" mused Blinky George. "Their ol' rubber feet'll be pussin' all over lookin' f'r a tip. I wisht I knew somethin' to sell 'em. I'm broke. Let's rob a bank."

There was a pause. No one deigned a reply. Then, suddenly, Jersey Pete, the shark hunter, gulped his whisky and leaned impressively forward, a strange, glittering light in his ugly little eyes. Jersey Pete was a reputed bad actor, and no one disputed this fact. He was a peter thrower and a slugger. The cops had no love for him, and it was little enough that would give them an excuse to pick him up.

His body was tense now; the yellow fingers that pinched the cigarette shook just a trifle; the visor of his cap hung low over his ever-restless eyes, which now half sneeringly crept over the face of each of his companions at the table.

"What would you-all say if I was t' tell you—if I was t' tell you—that—*I—knew who pulled th' big job?* What would yeh?"

For a long minute there was not a sound. Each had his or her eyes riveted on the immobile face of Jersey Pete, trying to fathom that sinister expression that leered out from between the lids of the shark hunter.

Then Baron, the Wop—who was not a wop at all—said:

"I'd say yeh was drunk as a lord, Jersey; or, maybe, had been hittin' th' pipe."

The shark hunter made a peculiar, open-handed sweep across the table in the direction of the Baron. It sent the latter's drink drenching into his lap. He sprang up and hurriedly brushed a portion of the sticky mess from his clothes, but there was a look in Jersey Pete's eyes which kept the Baron from fur-

thering certain hostilities which for the moment had been rampant in his fiery brain.

The shark hunter gave no secondary attention to the Baron, following that savage movement of disgust; instead, he slowly reasserted a portion of his statement that he *did* know who pulled the "big job," as he was pleased to term it.

"You—know?" demanded Lottie, canting her face several inches nearer Jersey Pete's features.

"That's what I said, wan't it?" the other flung back.

This was too much for Jenny.

"Well, then, why the all-fired hurrah don't you get it off your chest?" she asked. "What's the story? Let's have it!"

"Ye-e-s. Maybe," said the shark hunter, sneering. "An', maybe I'll take it up t' th' front office. Th' kind uh dope I tumbled t' las' night is worth good cush nowadays. Wait an' see. I'm bettin' that to-morrow's papers has real mazum up f'r j'st what I already sabe."

"To-morrow's!" snapped Jenny. "What d'ye mean —to-morrow? What's biting you, anyhow? Open up and give us the whole installment before it sours on you. Ain't we your friends? Har-r-h? Ain't we? Well, then, what's the matter with you?"

"He's fell into something," prophesied Lottie calmly, her face still prodded almost into the shark hunter's ear, "and he wants to hog it—only he ain't sure if it's a safe game for him to play alone."

The tone of her voice was all out of proportion to the smoldering touch of steel in her eyes.

Jersey Pete shifted uneasily in his chair. He was

more afraid of Charlestown Lottie than the bulls themselves. And truly she had read his mind straight as a string. His eyes met hers—and dropped.

"Here's th' dope," he said at length, half sullenly. "It looks good t' me, an' if th' rest uh yeh want t' make a play at it—— Well, whatever there is in it let it go five ways. I'm satisfied."

"Sure you are!" said Lottie. "Oh, my, yes! You don't dare to go near the cops with it—that's what's the matter with you. They've got it in for you for double crossing 'em on that West End job, and you know it. You want help. You've tipped your mitt. We're your candy! Who pulled the jewel robbery last night?"

"Ol' Quality Bill Race's girl."

"Blue Jean?"

"Yup! Blue Jean Billy."

Charlestown Lottie clutched the shark hunter savagely by the sleeve, and it was no light grip.

"Are you sure of that, Pete?"

"Sure!"

"Do you know where she is?"

"I knows where they unloaded somewhere aroun' midnight this morning' or last evenin', whichever it was."

"*They!* Who?"

Several voices came in on the interrogation. The thing was getting interesting—if the shark hunter was on the level with the stuff.

Jersey Pete hesitated a minute; then went on: "There was a swell in a waiter's suit, an' Shaver Michael an'—a-a——"

The shark hunter stopped suddenly. His face was on the doorway which opened to a set of

stairs leading down a back way to the bar on the floor below. The eyes of the others followed his gaze. It was enough.

Pushing easily into the room was Mr. Wood, of the famous International Agency—Robert Wood, fresh from his interview with Mr. de Vanderflip.

Except for two waiters idling at the dumb-waiter, and Mike and Barber himself, poring over a morning paper by the cash register, and the little group at the table, the room was empty. Mike's place seldom was patronized by the regular run of trade until after one o'clock. It was, however, a great place for the shady personages to gather and talk things over, get a drink to start the day right with, and hatch out fresh deviltry in the hours close bordering eleven o'clock. Mr. Wood knew this and timed his visit accordingly.

"How are you, Mike?" he greeted the proprietor cheerfully. "Nice day."

"How's yehself!" acknowledged the Barber gent. "Large night out in Four Hundred Acre."

"Yes, Mike. Considerable."

The detective moved along toward the now silent group at the table. They were tense, undecided, defiant; Wood was self-possessed, good-natured, but shrewdly alert and watchful. He was the first to speak.

"How are you, ladies and gentlemen?" he said. "You look downhearted. What's the matter?"

The elbow was not a stranger to those whom he now addressed. They had all met before.

"Hi, Wood!" greeted the Baron.

"Ah, kiddo," murmured Lottie.

The shark hunter growled a sulky "Hello!"

"Buy a drink?" demanded Jenny boldly, while Blinky George silkily requested the loan of one of the copper's coffin nails.

"Want to earn some money this morning?" demanded Mr. Wood, tossing the Blinky one a cigarette. "Easy money."

"Ever see us when we didn't?" demanded Lottie. "Easy's our middle name. What's the cue?"

"If I don't get some soft cush some place pretty soon," complained George, inhaling the new smoke hungrily, "I'm gonna ast f'r six mont's down duck."

The shark hunter had no comment to make. He was studying the detective's face sulkily from under the rim of that battered visor.

Mr. Wood pulled a bit of folded paper from the side pocket of his coat. Strangely enough, too, he tossed it onto the table directly in front of Jersey Pete.

The detective half turned, while he apparently busied himself with a light for his own weed. Nevertheless, his keen eyes lost no movement or significant glance of those before him, the shark hunter in particular.

The latter gentleman hesitated, his eyes still on the dick; then, suddenly, he snatched up the part of a printed sheet—the proofs of the rewards offered for information concerning the loot of the De Vanderflip & Co. jewels. In a flash the International man had read that start, which too late the shark hunter tried to smother.

"You see," Mr. Wood went on easily, "I'm letting you in on the ground floor. That's for the

morning papers. You've got pretty nearly twenty-four hours' start on any of the stools who happen to know anything." He was talking directly at the shark hunter, and still he could not have told just why—unless it was a sort of a hunch that he was nursing. He continued: "Just any little thing that you—or your friends"—his nod included those huddled together in an attempt to read that which Pete clutched in his hand—"might learn that would put us on the right track.

"If you're hep to who pulled the job, or where they're hiding"—Mr. Wood winked sagely—"why, just pass it along. If the tip is straight—the money is yours."

"Who's *they?*" inquired Charlestown Lottie shrewdly.

"The woman, of course, who did the work; and the man who helped her in the get-away."

"Anybody else you might want?"

"M-m! Nobody in particular."

"Wan't keeping an eye out for a guy who got spliced, and then bust right off all dressed up like a Christmas tree?"

"Why, I suppose if we see him running around loose we'll have to take him home. But outside of that we are not bothering much about him."

"You don't think this guy was inside on the stunt, maybe?"

"No. That would be foolish. He fell in with a pair of bad uns. That's all. If we have the good fortune to pick the others up, it's pretty safe to assume that Mr. Smythe will come bobbing up of his own accord, like a cork under water."

"There ain't nuthin' posted f'r Percy off th' pic'le boat, then?" Blinky George wanted to know. "Nuthin' a-tall? Notta red?"

"Nothing."

"I'd go lookin' f'r 'im f'r two bits," Blinky offered hopefully. "Two bits cash."

"Not interested," insisted the detective. "We want the jewels and the woman."

"Ain't yeh got any idea who th' moll is?" demanded Diamond Jenny. She stepped on the shark hunter's foot under the table.

"Nope!" denied the officer crisply. "I haven't. If you have, think it over. There's quite a lot of money posted for the lady, and quite a lot more for those jewels. I've got to beat it now. If you get anything, call up the International and leave word. I'll meet you any place."

There was a rather painful pause, during which Charlestown Lottie shot a shrewd glance at the shark hunter. Jersey Pete stared back stolidly.

The detective picked up the bit of proof, glancing sharply at the shark hunter.

"Do I hear any takers?" he said.

"We'll let yeh know—later," said Jersey Pete, at length, and without raising his eyes. "Maybe."

"Suit yourself," said the dick, smiling. Then his voice hardened just a trifle. "Only don't forget to play it with me straight. I won't stand for any of that old stuff. You know what I mean."

The shark hunter did not answer.

Mr. Wood turned and went out.

CHAPTER VIII

NO. 19 GREEN STREET

THERE were no lights visible in the three-story brick house with the French roof on Burchstead Street. The place was apparently deserted. Several "to-let" signs cluttered the windows downstairs. On the floor above, the blinds were closed, while the third-floor windows were bleak and bare, except for vagrant and elusive rays of reflections which played tag on the pane—which came and faded before the eye of the passer-by.

The house itself was back a little from the street, and alone in an unkempt yard of rambling, lawless shrubbery. It was entirely out of place in the neighborhood. Brick tenement houses on either side seemed almost to overhang its rickety boundary fences, while, at the rear, rubbish-littered and slovenly fire escapes leered derisively at the one-time stately mansion.

The flagstone walks were lined and crossed with sturdy grass shoots. The iron fence at the front was broken and lopsy; the gate latchless and irresolute. Decay was swiftly beginning its ravages everywhere.

The heirs of a once proud owner idled in far places and ignored the pleas of ambitious landowners who sought to desecrate the place with modern buildings. It was the "old home" anyway, and they would hang onto it for a while longer.

No tenants appeared, and time passed.

Blue Jean Billy Race, in the original schedule of her movements, had hoped so to efface her resemblance to the lady who had disrupted the wedding feast at De Vanderflip's by the simple expedient of contrast, that in street clothes she would pass anywhere unrecognized.

In this manner it would be possible for her to meet Shaver Michael at Driscoll's in broad daylight; at the same time exciting no suspicion when joining a second gentleman in a power boat and calmly chugging out into the bay.

So far as the first chapter of the thing went, the plan might have gone through. As simple as had been her disguise, not even the dick at the De Vanderflip home had recognized the youthful beauty in the princess satin as old Quality Bill's girl. And no one having seen her in evening array would immediately have recognized her later that night in street costume.

Shaver Michael, having played a most inconspicuous part in the activities of the evening, was pretty safe anyway. And the Shanghai Kid, loafing around the water-front saloons in the neighborhood of Driscoll's, was as secure from harm as though he had been in quod.

But when Algernon Smythe butted into the picture, and Blue Jean, almost on the impulse of the moment, had grabbed him off as a part of the loot, then the original cast went flooey.

Algernon's presence in the party made it necessary to get under cover quick, and to stay there till satisfactory lanes were built to get the gentleman quietly away, together with that chamois bag.

Thus it was that the night following the big stick-up in Four Hundred Acre, Blue Jean Billy was just completing her arrangements for the last lap when she would slip out into the night of the mighty bay and at last feel safe from both the coppers and those despised workers of the underworld—the stool pigeons.

The nerve strain had been great. Blue Jean was tired. It had been her first attempt in this game since the passing of Quality Bill Race, and it had not been easy.

There had been vast study, plans, and lines of carefully laid down and reviewed stratagem for every conceivable emergency, even including those days of play acting, of learning just how to carry herself in her evening gown.

Just for that night she was to be a real lady, and she must play her part well. The training in reputable schools in her girlhood had not been lost. The newspaper accounts, which Jean had read almost hungrily, told that. The carriage of the daring adventuress had been regal; her poise and natural grace a thing to be wondered at in one who chose the profession of a real yeggwoman, and she had carried her part through with cold indifference, yet with provoking politeness.

Then, too, there had been much space devoted to the mystery surrounding Mr. Algernon Whosis Pinagree Smythe, and the hint that possibly he might be held in some of the resorts of the city as a hostage. Rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the woman and the recovery of the

jewels. The police were working on the case, but as yet they had discovered no clew worthy of notice.

Billy Race tossed a morning paper away from her idly, leaned far back in the chair in which she had been reclining, and drew a long breath. Her eyes slowly traced their course about the familiar bits of bric-a-brac around her; then the pictures and the furniture.

The place had been her home a long time—19 Green Street. Her father had died there, and she still found the old rooms a welcome haven in times of stress. Since they had moved there, they had never been molested by the police. The last efforts of old Quality Bill's days had been so craftily carried through that the cops had had no reason to visit that tiny flat on the floor above Emile Prevot's dingy delicatessen shop.

The third floor of the place was unoccupied. Above and below the battered red-brick block, front and rear, the whole atmosphere was drear and bleak; and yet it was home. It was, too, of other things than the underworld and the crooked game that Blue Jean Billy found herself living with.

Through all her reverie there was a strange, invisible something that lurked in the background. The girl was unaware of it; still her mind kept reaching out mechanically for the answer to it. It was a sense of uneasiness. The birds of the air know it when the storm approaches.

Nevertheless, in a few hours she would be out in the night, picking her way toward the white-mounted surf of Raggedy Ann and safety and rest. Her provisions were there, and blankets, a shipmate

stove and fuel a foot deep on the shore—the washed-up remains of a barge load of coal wrecked on the Roaring Bulls.

Everything was set for to-night. Once with this pretty Percy out there, and the loot in that hiding place she knew, with the faithful Shanghai Kid on guard at Raggedy Ann, she would feel safe to come and go, to carry on those negotiations which must be planned later concerning Algernon's valuation in his home circle.

After that—— Well, the paths of the world would be open to her. She sighed a little wearily, and rested her head against the chair back. Her eyes closed, and sleep crept close.

Even now there was that thing far off somewhere in the back of her head that irritated.

Blue Jean Billy's lids remained tight shut, but her senses were alert. The sleep that was there dissolved slowly. It was the thing that saved her.

Green Street runs parallel to Burchstead. The two thoroughfares are back to back, so to speak, and the back of Emile Prevot's place is crowded close to that weatherworn fence which divides it from the rear of the three-story house with the French roof which faces on Burchstead.

The uneven flat roofs of tar and gravel along Green Street are only divided by the party walls which extend some two or three feet above them, for all the world like a row of hurdles between roof top and roof top.

Each roof has its small, wooden stair well, and shambling, creaky door, which leads down a flight

of worn, uneven stairs to the corresponding third floor below. Thus each of the three-story brick tenements may be entered from the main doorway at the front, a narrow, dingy passage from the rear, or the roof—or, perchance, in unusual emergency—on Green Street or the forbidding back alley—by areaway to the cellar.

Two sets of stairs lead to the basement, the one for use of Mr. Prevot; the other for the tenants above. The latter passed directly to the back hallway, and entirely independent of the delicatessen shop. Hence there are many doors to No. 19, and like houses of the block.

It was by way of the roof, however, that two dark figures essayed to force an entrance. The one of these was a man; the other a woman—Jersey Pete, the shark hunter, and Charlestown Lottie.

It was a little after eleven o'clock. The night was exceedingly black and overcast. The air was cold and chill, while a bleak November wind was beginning to whimper out of the east. The sick, soggy gloom, the biting wind, lurking shadows here and there in the poorly lighted street—all lent something weird and grim to the atmosphere.

The stillness, too, may have added something to the setting that held just the touch necessary to make the whole scene vivid in the gray shadow of the unknown.

Emile Prevot had gone home; his place was black. On the floor above a yellow streak of light shone past a drawn curtain. The lower hall was pitch dark. Only a street lamp on the corner above lighted the entrance to No. 19, and this but poorly.

At the corner farther down the street a hoofer appeared, rang his box, and crossed to the rear curb to exchange greetings with a brother in uniform. A few minutes later the first policeman returned down the side street whence he had appeared; the other continued on along Green—away from No. 19.

The slow click of their heels on the brick walks died away. Then from somewhere in the misty blackness a whistle sounded two soft notes—a high note and a low one. It came, apparently, from one of those black hallways across the street. It was followed by a quietly closing door.

There was a crunch of gravel. A moment later the curved point of a jimmy was inserted beside the lock of that door on the roof above Mr. Prevot's store. It was surprising how easily the thing was accomplished. Whatever Jersey Pete had done to earn the title of "shark hunter," the fact remained that none in the business were more clever than he when it came to "garreting a crib."

Nevertheless, in spite of the ease with which he half lifted the door open enough for his body to squeeze through, a rusty hinge complained jarringly, just once. Jersey swore softly, and was assisted by Charlestown Lottie.

For several minutes they remained motionless, listening for any indications that this traitorous squeak had been heard.

Apparently it had not. Jersey Pete swung his flash onto the stairs, and with catlike tread the two began the descent. A warped board complained, which elicited more gentle profanity; then another,

though less stridently. They were on the third floor now.

In that doorway across the street Mulatto Baldy Johnson hung silently in the shadows and watched the window with its betraying streak of yellow light.

Huddled in the hall at the rear of No. 19 were Baron, the Wop, and Diamond Jenny. Blinky George was sitting on the front steps of Mike, the Barber's, place, drunk as a lord. Somebody had slipped him a "V" he was not expecting. That personage had been Charlestown Lottie. With the money she had tendered advice that Blink forget a lot of things, the suggestion that he go ahead and drink his fool head off, and the promise that if he was a good boy and could keep right on forgetting, there would be some more nice, soft money coming to him.

Blinky promptly got drunk, and just as promptly forgot everything that he had ever known; which was most obliging.

Another figure hurried upstage at this point—Shaver Michael, returning from Driscoll's.

It was close to that appointed hour when Algernon W. P. Smythe, all togged out so that his own wife wouldn't have known him, would begin a stroll leading to the water front, his arm linked in that of a plainly dressed lady who would appear most solicitous concerning his welfare.

The time would be be in the neighborhood of eleven thirty. Therefore a lady and gentleman arm in arm at that hour would not be an unusual sight on the downtown streets. Such was Blue Jean Billy's reckoning.

Also, she believed that certain kinds of moral suasion were great institutions.

She had explained to Mr. Smythe, patiently and at some length, that during this little amble he was to remember and be a perfect gentleman, and to try to refrain from speaking to strangers, because under her coat her right hand would carry a gat, and it would be pointed at his ribs. He was going on a little journey, and if he was good everything would be lovely, but if he went so far as to forget himself and be a bad boy and make a fuss, she, or Mr. Michael, who would be strolling along just behind them, would have to shoot him. That was all.

Did Mr. Smythe understand? Mr. Smythe *did* understand.

In something like fifteen minutes Blue Jean Billy Race would boldly take Algernon by the arm and with him walk the six city blocks to Driscoll's, where the Shanghai Kid and the power boat would be waiting. Shaver Michael would follow them.

Pinagree's car, in the meantime, was undergoing certain necessary alterations in a garage where many wayward automobiles were wont to find a welcome. It was a good bargain; Shaver had let it go cheap.

So, in that direction the tracks of Blue Jean and her crafty companion were covered from the police. As far as the game had progressed, everything was all that could be asked. Of course, the trip from No. 19 to Driscoll's would be the acid test. But the thing was all a chance. If a bull recognized either Blue Jean or Mr. Michael, and chose to pick them up on suspicion—— Well, that would be tough luck.

But that was ahead—a bridge to be crossed boldly, as had been those that were behind.

In the meanwhile, however, there were disasters other than shaky bridges lurking in the gloom. Two of them were the shark hunter and Charlestown Lottie.

They were now at the foot of the stairs leading from the third floor. At the far end of the hall was the door that led to the rooms occupied by Blue Jean Billy Race.

A door on the street floor opened and closed with a disturbing clatter. From without came two short, sharp notes of that same whistle. Jersey Pete and Lottie crouched against the wall by the rear stairs, while the quick skuff of footsteps on the treads at the front sounded nearer.

Just before they reached the top they suddenly paused. The shark hunter clutched his gat, as his body sagged a bit nearer the floor.

It was a desperate game. The lust was in their blood. Blinky George excepted, the little group seen at Mike, the Barber's, had flung themselves into the game, not for the reward offered—but for that rich loot the papers had so painstakingly described. Five thousand dollars' reward was chicken feed beside it, and they alone, through a bit of blundering fortune on the shark hunter's part, had stumbled to the knowledge that old Quality Bill Race's girl had pulled the job.

Jersey Pete had seen her, had seen the trio in Mr. Smythe's roadster when it pulled up in front of No. 19 Green Street. A glimpse of Algernon in his eve-

ning regalia, the morning papers—two and two. It was plenty.

To play rat and turn Blue Jean up to the bulls was not enough. Their greed was too great; the loot of Four Hundred Acre too rich for that.

Shaver Michael could never have told just what it was that caused him to pause two steps from the top of that flight of stairs, what it was that held him there tense for a moment, peering through the banisters back along the hall.

Whatever it was that directed him, he had, with only an instant's hesitation, jerked out his electric torch, pressed the button—and flung its flaring rays full in the face of the crouching shark hunter and Charlestown Lottie.

Somewhere in the night outside hurried steps partly muffled their going by keeping close along grass-bordered flagstones of walks long violated by vagrant growths—steps that faded with the opening and closing of a basement door in the three-story house with a French roof on Burchstead Street.

CHAPTER IX

BLINKY IS GRILLED

WHEN Blinky George woke up, the world was going round and round, and every little while some of it was falling off and hitting him all over. It was a most peculiar sensation. Blinky didn't care for it at all. The disturbance continued until the inebriated gentleman was in an advanced stage of soberification—if there is such a thing.

When the gyrations had eased up somewhat, Blinky discovered that his person was dusting off all the brickwork surrounding the entrance to Mike, the Barber's, joint, and that the seat of the resurrection was one Robert Wood, dick.

"Talk, Lord blast your miserable hide!" the attacking party was saying. "Open your trap and say something before I beat a hole in the brick with you. Where's the shark hunter? Where's Jersey Pete? Answer me before I cram my fist right square down your throat. And don't lie. Come on! Come on!"

Blinky gulped, spat some dirt out of his mouth, and blinked hard at the elbow who held him clutched by the nape of the neck in a grasp of iron. As always, one thought was foremost in George's mind when dealing with the bulls, and the gentleman was not averse to stool to the coppers or betray a friend —if there was any money in it.

He was trying to get his bearings all straightened

out, but he was not drunk any more. He hesitated. Again the International man shook him—shook him as a dog would a woodchuck.

"Say it!" cried the dick, as he noted the hangdog uncertainty in the other's eyes. "Open that trap of yours and let it out!"

"Wh-what do I get?" mumbled Blinky George.

"You'll get killed!" said Mr. Wood, between his teeth, giving the unfortunate Blinky another savage shaking. "And you're going up to the front office anyway. You know what that means. Oh, I've kept my eye out for just such a gag as your dirty tribe are trying to pull off. They lost my man, who was tailing them. But by all that's holy, my luck turned when I stumbled onto you, you sop. Now shell, and do it quick. What's the dope?"

"I dunno! I dunno!" whined Blinky, trying to get a little air down past that gripping neckband. "They fruz' meh out f'r th' price uh a jag. I didn't have no guts f'r uh croakin'. No guts—s' help meh!"

"Quick! Where are they now? Tell me the truth, and let me have it all-lovingly sudden!"

"I dunno—f'r sure! I dunno—hones'! All's I savvy wuz suthin' about n-ninet'n—— Ah, don't choke. Le'me 'lone! Ar-r-gh!"

"Nineteen *what?* What street? Where? Spit it out! You r-rat!"

"Gr-Green Str't! An' ut looks b-bad—more like uh croakin'."

"I knew it!" yelped the elbow. "I knew it! I knew that shark hunter had something when I put it up to 'em this morning. It's plain as day. They're

going to 'get' the woman who cleaned up at De Vanderflip's—they're going to cop the stuff for themselves."

The detective jerked a whistle from his pocket and blew it, at the same time unceremoniously hustling Blinky George toward the box in the square.

A few minutes later two hoofers came hurrying from opposite directions.

"Lock this guy up!" directed the man in plain clothes.

"All right, Mr. Wood," said one of the harness men, as his fingers crept under Blinky's collar, while the detective's slipped out.

Instantly the agency man turned to the other officer.

"I guess you'd better take a run down to No. 19 Green Street with me," he said. "It looks like something doing. Jersey Pete and Baldy Johnson and a couple of skirts are up to some mischief. We will have to shake a leg or we'll be sending for the coroner, or I miss a bet."

"I didn't think that bunch had nerve enough to mix in anything of that sort," said the man in uniform, as they hustled off toward No. 19.

"Well, I didn't either," admitted Mr. Wood. "But they've gone mad with lust for something that must look pretty easy to them."

"Say!" exploded the harness bull suddenly. "Do you know what No. 19 Green Street was? It's just dawned on me, and I knew it was familiar, somehow. Sure, and wan't it where old Quality Bill Race used to live?"

"By gad! You're right!" breathed the dick. "I'd

forgotten. But has any one been living there since old Bill cashed his checks?"

"You got me," puffed the copper; "unless, maybe, it's his girl. And I don't know if she's still there or not. Wow! This's getting gummy!"

"Yes, sir!" admitted Mr. Wood. "It is!" And he whistled softly.

Both men gave their undivided attention now just to getting speed out of their legs, as they raced down deserted streets and took short cuts through littered alleys. Another officer joined them, while a few night stragglers trailed on behind.

CHAPTER X

ON THE STAIRS

IN the grim desperation of his plight, there was but one thing for Shaver Michael to do. That was to snap off that flash and get down. And he did it—quick.

In that instant there was a report, while a hurtling bit of lead smashed through one of the banisters of the rickety railing. The sound of the gun echoed and reëchoed through the place, following which was the pungent odor of powder smoke—then silence came.

From beneath the door leading to Blue Jean's room a strip of light still shone; but there was no apparent movement within. Had Blue Jean Billy, in the weariness which came with the reaction following the nerve strain of the night before, slipped into a deep sound slumber? Had she relaxed in those moments of waiting, knowing full well that when the time came for the move they were to make at eleven thirty, the faithful Shaver Michael would come for her?

Had Blue Jean, the crafty, keen crook, allowed herself to be hemmed in on all sides by other stealthy peoples of the underworld, by wolves that knew no code?

Every door was guarded by them now, while the gritty Shaver alone was between those old home walls to which Blue Jean Billy had brought the wonderful loot of Four Hundred Acre.

On the floor below Baron, the Wop, flattened himself against the wall of the corridor and inched toward the foot of the front stairs. The shark hunter squatted lower and waited. Shaver Michael slipped his automatic from his pocket and hung poised, scarcely breathing.

He had been caught off his guard. Something was wrong, and the chances of a get-away growing slimmer every instant. A fight meant the cops, and that meant failure, surrender, the pen. But the gentleman was game. He was sorry for Blue Jean Billy, she was a square un, and too good for the dirty mess.

He'd fight it out for her. He'd give 'em all he had, and trust that *she* found a chance to slip away. He listened intently. Somewhere in the blackness he could hear heavy breathing; then a board creaked in the hall under him. They were everywhere.

The Shaver carefully poked the nose of his rod through the banisters. There was no time to be lost. He'd got to start something. That was all there was to it. The crook, however, failed to realize, till it was too late, that peering eyes from the floor below could see the outline of his body, dimly silhouetted against what faint light shone from beneath that door a few feet beyond.

Then another shot rang through the stillness, and this time from the first floor. Something hot and searing scorched the back of Shaver Michael's neck. He sank closer to the balustrade, while a quick, grim half horror clutched him. He sent a hurried shot into the blackness of the hall before him; then crept a little higher on the stairs.

Two more missiles spat into the plaster over him.

Again came that deadly fire from the man below. The bullet caught the Shaver in the hip. It did not hurt, it was as though somebody had prodded him with a pointed stick. Then he felt it wet and warm there.

The thing was getting desperate, and still no sign from Blue Jean's rooms. A horrifying thought came to Shaver Michael. Had they been there before him and overpowered the girl—or killed her? Was this merely finishing a job begun? Had he only surprised them in the get-away?

As the thought worked through his brain he became savagely defiant. On the instant he staggered to his feet, laughing grimly, as he sent two shots in the direction of the hidden foe on the second floor; then turned his gun toward the enemy downstairs, and squeezed the handle twice more.

For several seconds after the noise of the shots died out there was no sound. Jersey Pete and the Baron were playing it carefully and close to the board. If the shooting disturbed the neighborhood and the cops came, they would take their chances on getting out of it by turning Blue Jean up. She was probably hiding there in the room, her nerve having deserted her when the shooting began.

Certainly she had not left the place all afternoon; Baldy could swear to that. She'd get hers. It would serve the snipe right. She'd always been a stuck-up thing—just like old Quality Bill—too good for the rest of 'em. A good "jolt" would fetch her down.

Another report shattered the night. It was from the gat in the hands of the Baron. The body of Shaver Michael swayed uncertainly; then pitched face

down onto the floor before the door of Blue Jean's room. There was a sound of exultation from both above and below.

The Baron was the first to reach the body. Jersey Pete and Charlestown Lottie were more cautious, or perhaps you would choose to call it yellow.

Be that as it may, in that instant when the Baron paused above the prostrate Shaver Michael, the man on the floor, in one last grim effort, twisted himself on his side and emptied the remaining contents of his automatic fair into the Baron's stomach.

Thus it was that when Blue Jean's faithful ally passed into the unknown, he did not go alone.

Jersey Pete, however, and Lottie and Diamond Jenny did not let a little thing like that interfere with the matter at hand. The shark hunter jammed his shoulder against the door below which the streak of light shone, and a moment later bulged into the room beyond.

The big, cozy oil lamp was burning on the table in the center of the living room. A morning paper was tentlike where it had been carelessly tossed on the floor. Everything else was in absolute order.

A pair of heavy draperies separated this from the room beyond. Cautiously the shark hunter pushed these aside. It was a bedroom, but empty, although the place was as immaculate in its neatness as the outer room had been. There was a bit of a hall, a bathroom and kitchen, each in order, but each deserted.

A frantic search of the closets, the back hall, even beneath the bed and folding couch in the living room,

followed; but it was useless. Blue Jean Billy Race had gone.

Somewhere up the street the patter of running feet sounded. There was a frantic whistle signal from the watchful "crow" in the doorway across the way.

The bulls were coming on the run. There was no time to lose. Hurriedly the trio retreated toward the stairs which led to the penthouse on the roof; then retreated back over other roofs farther and farther away from the treacherous No. 19.

Behind a huge chimney some four or five roofs beyond they paused for breath and a whispered consultation. Quickly they must form other plans. Mulatto Baldy Johnson had, in all probability, by this time made himself exceedingly scarce, and there were none left to tell tales. The Baron and Shaver Michael would be mute witnesses.

Then something in the blackness caught their attention—a subdued sound that came from the direction of a shrouded and mysterious yard below, and to their right as they looked back. It came from beyond the bare and ragged shrubbery bounding a huge square building which bore the marks of long desertion.

It was the house with the French roof on Burchstead Street.

The huddled group remained tense and motionless. The shark hunter was nervous.

"Did yeh shut that door at th' foot uh th' stairs behind yeh?" he demanded of Lottie.

"Yes, I did!" snapped this lady. "Tighter'n the devil!"

"Lord help us if th' bulls gets a slant at that jim-

mied door on top!" continued Jersey Pete. "They'll be all over th' roof like flies."

"I'd like to know how they tumbled to the mess so quick, anyhow,". Diamond Jenny found time to say. "They lit right into nineteen like they knew sure as Satan where they was going."

"Aw, somebody around here telephoned," said Lottie disgustedly. "A fine mess we made of it, an' that nasty, stuck-up jane getting away with her end of it at that. Can you beat it? Bah!"

"An' how in th' name uh all blasted things did she get out?" the shark hunter wanted to know. "She was in there—then she wan't. An' us lampin' th' place four ways. C'me awn! Le's move!"

"Wa-a-it a minute!" rasped Lottie savagely. "Look!"

She was squinting through the misty blackness excitedly. Softly a swollen door was pulled shut. There was a crackle of leafless bushes, and a moment later two shadowy forms appeared. As they passed the corner of the huge, silent house, the background of a street lamp's illumination beyond showed them to be a man and a woman. They were walking arm in arm, and the man carried a small, black leather bag.

They passed quickly out of sight around the house, and walked in the direction of Burchstead Street.

Blue Jean Billy Race, of 19 Green Street, and Mr. Algernon Whosis P. Smythe, of Four Hundred Acre, were on their way to that little landing off the wharf at Driscoll's.

CHAPTER XI

BLUE JEAN'S FLIGHT

OLD Quality Bill, like the master crook he had been, never left any stone unturned to safeguard himself. The result was that he had seldom been in the toils of the police. In the days of his youth he had held in life positions of worth and responsibility. Always his mind had been trained in the details of things, and broadened in that ability to see and plan for the emergencies that are of tomorrow.

In later years, when the tide seemed turned against him, the keenness of that trained brain never deserted him. Too, it was an inheritance that was the girl's. Her mind had always been on the details of the play. Hence it was that nearly always she found herself forearmed.

For instance, two fine wires, carefully hidden, connected with a tiny buzzer and a cell of dry battery in her rooms at No. 19 Green Street, traced their way along moldings and finish work to the frame of that door in the penthouse on the roof. Like wires were connected with a tiny buzzer of different tone and a cell of battery to the frame of the front door, and a third outfit to the back door downstairs; a fourth to that door leading to the cellar.

The minute any of these doors was opened, even a hair, she was warned. This night there had been

two separate admonitions. No one legally had business at either that door in the penthouse or the one leading to the cellar. Therefore it was safe to assume that there were enemies about—either the police or others.

She had not been asleep when the warnings sounded, but still struggling with that strange sense of impending disaster that had been haunting her. At the time, neither the chamois bag nor Mr. Algernon Smythe were in the house—another example of her thoroughness. Both had been painstakingly concealed in separate and secluded places in the basement of the three-story house on Burchstead Street—a strange, old-fashioned place, the interior of which Blue Jean knew as she knew the palm of her hand.

With the sounding of the two low-toned electric buzzers she had quietly slipped into her coat, put on her hat, dropped her pistol into a side pocket, and, using care not to pass near the windows on the street side, had let herself stealthily out of the kitchen window at the rear to the fire escape.

From here she made her way down the rusty iron descent to the last rung, from which she dropped lightly to the ground.

It had been the muffled sounds of pistol shots somewhere within those brick walls behind her which warned her of the probable fate of Shaver Michael. She decided at once that the only course left to her was to proceed to Driscoll's, and trust that the gods of chance were still with her.

She felt suddenly that they were forsaking her. Truly, if the Shaver had been killed it would seem so. He had been a faithful pal and a gritty one,

and never had he for an instant showed an inclination to forget that she was old Quality Bill's girl, and therefore very much a lady, even though her paths lay in the underworld.

Within ten minutes after she left those rooms on the second floor at No. 19, she was making her way out to Burchstead Street. In another ten minutes she would be at Driscoll's, and her chances for a successful get-away enhanced by half; that is, if nothing happened to further the pursuit from that place.

Just as, twenty-four hours ago, the shark hunter, in his nightly wanderings, had by chance glimpsed Blue Jean when she arrived at No. 19, just so now, quite as though directed by some evil spirit, those same ugly little rat eyes were watching the woman and her captive as they started for the wharf on the avenue.

Reaching the rickety iron gates at the front of the house, Blue Jean paused, glancing cautiously both ways. Then in one quick movement she slipped the visor of the borrowed cap which Algernon was wearing down over his eyes, and accordingly down over the two black patches of cloth which she had previously fastened securely there.

He could pass now as a blind man or a gentleman who had received two peepers in the fray somewhere. Too, it would account for the solicitous manner in which the woman guided him along the streets. He carried her precious bag by special request.

Also, at this time she offered fresh advice as they turned into the street.

"Mr. Smythe," she said, "you may realize it, or

you may not as yet, the fact that I am quite a desperate woman."

"Yes," Algernon admitted wearily; "I guess I understand all about that part of it. You'd shoot me for a nickel. Well, never mind; I'm quite at your service."

"My!" exclaimed Blue Jean. "Isn't that nice of you. But please don't forget it—no matter what happens, or who stops us. You're my brother, and I am taking you home. Nevertheless, I still have you covered under my coat." Then she added for good measure: "And the gentleman whom you met last night is walking right behind us. You don't hear him; he's wearing rubber heels."

Jean smiled to herself, just a little grimly.

Many of the harness bulls in the Green Street district knew Blue Jean Billy. She was merely old Quality Bill's girl to them. In address she was just Billy. She had no record; they therefore had nothing on her—yet.

At the junction of Montrose and Buffin Streets, Officer Pat Clancy, idly swinging his night stick, watched her approach now.

"My! My!" he mused. "Sure an' I niver knowed ol' Quality's girrul was that kind. 'Tis a shame she don't be after havin' a mother to kape her right. She's a bright lass, an' a good one sez all th' boys at th' station. Ah-h, that crooked dad iv hers!"

Blue Jean approached at a moderate pace, head up and her eyes steady. Her gaze met the reproachful one of Officer Clancy squarely.

"Good avenin', Billy!" said the patrolman. "Don't yez be afther bein' out a trifle late?"

"Good evening, Pat!" responded the girl evenly. "Yes, it is pretty late, but I am taking home a friend of my father's, who met with a little accident over at McDonald's place." She nodded at the low-drawn visor and the black eye pads underneath.

The copper nodded sagely, as his glance took in the battered cap, ill-fitting and somewhat soiled clothes, and crumpled shirt.

"Well, take fine care iv 'im. He is afther bein' mighty lucky to have a foine lady like yerself to take 'im home. Good night!"

"Good night, Pat!"

It might be stated that at this point there was considerable shuffling by the feet of Mr. Smythe, and there is no doubt but that considerable shuffling went on also in the gentleman's mind.

"Who was that?" he asked, after they had progressed a little way.

"That was a policeman!" said Blue Jean Billy evenly, and at the same time prodding Algernon in the ribs with the muzzle of her automatic.

Pinagree Smythe groaned audibly, while his knees wabbled beneath him. He'd been within two feet of a policeman, and this woman *knew* the officer, greeted him, in fact, like an old friend!

His fair companion hailed a night hawk at his stand before one of the cheaper downtown hotels. Again she was beset by that strange feeling of uneasiness, or perhaps it was the hunger to feel the planking of her boat under her, hear the throb of its powerful engine, and feel the old swell of the sea lifting and falling beneath her. Whatever it was, she

suddenly decided that she was in more or less of a hurry.

She pushed Mr. Smythe through the door the cabby was holding open, and followed quickly herself.

"Central Wharf!" she directed tersely. "And I'll pay for any wheels that come off when you're going around the corners."

"There ain't no sailin's fr'm there t'-night, mum." The old bird of the night was a little doubtful.

Blue Jean took her right hand from under her coat and canted it in the direction of the gentleman from Missouri.

"*I'm* sailing from Central Wharf—Driscoll's landing to be exact—in just about four minutes!" she said. "And the quicker you get the breath of life into that old skate of yours the less time you'll have to sit up there and know how it feels to have a gat aimed at the middle of your back. Down Front and India right to the avenue, and no funny business, or you'll go to purgatory with a lead ballast."

The cabby had heard all about purgatory from early childhood, and he was taking no chances with either that or a cargo of lead. For an old man, he climbed up exceedingly lively. Also, for a dejected, world-weary nag, the outfit careened around the first corner like a thousand dollars.

Again the subtle woman sense had saved the day for Blue Jean Billy. Less than two blocks had been covered when from back along the streets behind her there came to her ears the sound of an automobile with its cut-out wide open. The mouth of the woman set in a grim, hard line. Still she was as

cool and self-possessed as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Something—somewhere—took an awful slip," she said, half aloud. "It's by me what it was. And poor old Shaver, we're leaving you behind."

Even in that moment a distant light of yearning crept into her eyes. "Was the game worth it? Was it?"

There was no time for meditations now. That car behind was coming terribly fast. Would she make it, or was she to be trapped right there on the edge of blue water? If only the Shanghai Kid was all ready! Her mind raced over the parts of her engine.

The throttle, the spark, the gas, the priming can. She saw herself going through every movement in starting the ponderous machine. Would it fire the first time she turned it over? Or would it take several tugs up against compression to start her?

Every instant would count then. It would only take seconds for those behind to swarm aboard, or to riddle the craft with bullets.

She turned to the man beside her. Her voice was hard, her words short and tense.

"When we stop, you've got to move quicker than you ever did before in your life." She snatched the black patches from his eyes. "Our friends are right behind us. I've never seen the inside of a pen, and I don't intend to. I've got a power boat at a landing beside the wharf down here. When we stop, you run for it as though your life depended on it—*for it does!*"

"Yes!" mumbled Mr. Smythe, and said no more.

The rickety hack jounced over the uneven paving of the district and nearly upset as it whirled into India Street. Behind, the roar of the approaching automobile sounded nearer. The thing was narrowing down. Only a minute or two more, and Blue Jean would be at Driscoll's.

"And then," said Blue Jean Billy softly, "if the good Lord will only allow me just sixty seconds to make that engine talk, we'll give them all a regular run for their money. Yes, we will!"

The tottering cab swung onto the avenue and jounced across the uneven tracks of the Union Freight Company. A boxlike locomotive with some dozen freight cars in tow was creeping out into the street from the wharf itself. The cabby just swung past in front of it. Blue Jean opened the door.

"Right down onto the wharf!" she cried. "As far as you can go."

As the cab swerved to take the abrupt turn, the rear left wheel, like the old shay, crumpled and gave up the ghost. With a purring roar the pursuing automobile shot from India Street into the avenue—just too late to cross ahead of the Union locomotive. It must wait, or else run around the slow-moving switcher with its drag.

"Quick!" Blue Jean Billy was already free of the wrecked hack, and was tugging at Mr. Smythe. The gentleman staggered out almost in a half daze. "Run!" the girl ordered. "Run!"

Algernon did—but in the wrong direction. The thing was getting altogether too speedy for his poor, fuddled being. Blue Jean grabbed him by the hand, clutched at her precious bag with the other; then,

half dragging Pinagree Smythe behind her, she raced toward that landing at the far end of the wharf.

She had reached the run leading to the float itself when the dread car shot past the head house. Like a mad thing possessed, it bore down on them. But the girl was cool as the green water before her now. The patient Shanghai Kid was waiting, as he threw her a hail of encouragement.

Algernon P. Smythe never remembered exactly just how he got aboard that gray boat waiting there off the pier end of Driscoll's.

Events had followed one another with too great rapidity. He had just stumbled, then sort of been steered, and the next thing he knew he was aboard the boat. It seemed almost simultaneous with his arrival here that there was a lurch and jerk of starting and the roar of a big, heavy-duty engine as it went to work hitting on both cylinders.

Somewhere in the blackness back of them, several shots sputtered in the night.

Crafty Blue Jean Billy hugged the wharf around to the opposite side; then suddenly shot her boat out into the harbor. At last she had the blue water under her, and she could laugh at them all.

CHAPTER XII

HANGMAN'S ISLAND

IT seemed that there had never been a night so black. Too, there was a thick, driving mist, which made it almost impossible to see a boat length ahead. There were no lights visible—no channel lights, range lights, riding lights—nothing.

The blanket of night and the drenching drizzle made of the water a world isolated from everything. Only the haunting blare of foghorns and the clang of bells came through it. The east wind which fanned in across the water was savagely raw, and penetrated to the bone.

When the outline of wharf buildings faded, all direction was gone. There was nothing save the gray outline of one's own boat. A deep-throated whistle blast, far, dim, blurry lights, as they appeared in the heavy mist, and a giant tug plowed past in the furrow of her own wave-making close off the bow.

Inshore just north of the Eastern Ferry Slip there was the sudden clamor of voices and several shouted orders. The police boat—*Harbor II.*, forty-three-footer, one hundred and thirty horsepower—was backing away from its berth. There would be something doing now.

A searchlight shot into the gloom, but it could not penetrate the ever-thickening mist; its rays formed only a yellow splotch.

Blue Jean cut her motor into the underwater exhaust, which, with the hatch closed over the engine, gave the gray boat the silence necessary. For with a speedy nineteen-miler coming out after them, it could only be a question of stillness and crafty dodging.

Mr. Smythe was shut in the cabin, while the Shanghai Kid took his place beside Blue Jean at the wheel.

The eyes of the girl alternated between the wall of gloom before them and the compass beneath its tiny binnacle lamp. Almost by instinct she headed straght out toward the northern end of the Bird Island Flats. She glanced at her watch; then consulted a tide calendar.

An ebb tide was running. It had been high at nine fifty-one.

Somewhere back of them there was the murmur of voices and the swish of water. The Shanghai Kid looked behind nervously. He was thinking of that ugly little rapid-fire gun squatting on its low tripod on the forward deck of the *Harbor II*. Blue Jean was thinking of about how many chances she stood of getting across those flats at the northern end of Bird Island. With a going tide, if they ever hit they would be good for six hours—right there. If they got across to the narrow Bird Island Channel they would put a barrier of shoals and flats between themselves and the police boat two miles long. Then, with the night to help them, and its thickening mist, they could hope for lots of things.

The deepest water was close to the rocks of the island. Blue Jean held her course till she could hear the wash of the slight swell that was beating against

the shore; then she put the wheel hard over and headed straight toward the flats. Neither of the two figures spoke. Both were tense, worried. A minute passed, and another and another.

Then there was a jarring, backward tug of the boat. It lurched ahead, only to feel again the clutch of black mud at its keel. Blue Jean slipped her hand into the engine cabin and felt for the lever controlling the spark. Her fingers found it almost instantly, and set it ahead. Churning white water boiled astern, as the propeller raced and fought.

Once the boat came to a complete standstill. Instantly the girl had grabbed an oar and was jamming it over the side into the mud, and crowding against it with all her might. The Shanghai Kid crawled far out to the bow to shift the weight forward and help lift that dragging keel clear.

There was a quiver, a lurch ahead, a pause—and they were sliding over the back of the Bird Island Flats into deep water. Blue Jean reached out in the gloom and patted the shining, moist cabin roof.

"Good old girl," she murmured thankfully. "Good old scout, you've taken us through again."

For a moment she left the Kid at the wheel, while she slipped into the low cabin to work out her course. A moment's work with protractor and chart, and she had it.

"We ought to be right off a beacon here," she said, as she took her place beside the man in the cockpit. Her eyes strained through the night.

"There it is!" she cried. "We leave it to starboard; then it's southeast by south one point south till we pick up a red spar, a No. 4. And after that

straight as a string south-southwest for fifty minutes —and we'll call it a day."

"Are yeh goin' out *there* t'-night?" the other wanted to know, shivering just a little.

"No," said Blue Jean, shaking her head. "Not to-night. I don't know how much the S. P.'s will help out the harbor cops, but the chasers will be down there at the Narrows pretty thick, and we won't take the chance."

"Well, where are yeh goin' then?" the Kid wanted to find out. "Lord knows, th' ol' bay'll get a awful rakin' at daylights."

"Running south-southwest fifty minutes," Blue Jean Billy explained patiently, "will take us right straight to Hangman's Island."

The Kid groaned. "Ah, f'r th' love uh Mike, couldn't yeh pick out nothin' that's got suthin' cheerful about it? Har-r-h? Ye gawds! Hangman's Island! If th' bulls ever nail us out there, there won't be nuthin' wrong with th' gosh-blasted title uh it. Notta thing!"

"Well," Blue Jean went on, at length, "it's a part of the game. You know that. Poor old Shaver's paid, I guess."

"I was just goin' t' ast yeh about him?" murmured the Shanghai Kid wistfully. "Things was comin' so fas' f'r a w'ile I didn't have no chanct. What was th' matter, anyhow? What slipped?"

"I don't know, Shanghai," the girl replied, a little wearily. "Something went wrong—somewhere. I just got away in time. I heard some pistol shots back in the old place; so I guess it must have been Shaver. Poor devil walked right into a trap, and I

couldn't do a thing. It was a pretty close squeak as it was—what with this excess baggage I was fool enough to cart along.

"The poor dub got so excited and balled up that on the last lap, when he had all the chance in the world to beat it, he let me take him by the hand and lead him right aboard."

"And where was that fellow who was following us?" came a voice from the interior.

Blue Jean opened the hatch a few inches.

"Sh-h-h!" she admonished. "The bogy mans will hear you. There was nobody following us—outside of some odd police officers."

Pinagree was beginning to think of a lot of things that he would like to know. He'd been gagged till his jaws seemed made of wood; then there was a strange flight in darkness, and now a boat. He didn't care for the experience at all. He made remarks to that effect now. He wanted to go back to his Muriel, and he wanted to send a message to the old man, and he wanted to know what they did with his automobile, and lots of other things.

Blue Jean closed the hatch.

"He's talking to himself," she said. "He's got money in the bank."

Close to the time she had figured, the gray boat nosed up along that rocky bit of shore which is the northern side of Hangman's Island.

The place itself is scarcely more than rocks awash. Though there are several formations of worn and gullied stone which rise some ten or fifteen feet, at high tide the main part of the island is less than six feet out of water, leaving a strip of land about three

hundred feet long and considerably less than that in width, which, from the distance of a mile, appears to be little other than the back of some huge sea monster.

Three tiny huts are on Hangman's, and a rickety shed. In summer months it is the home of Portugese fishermen; after November begins, it is deserted.

Bleak and haunting, in its loneliness and silent shadows, it was to-night. But it held no awesome aspect for the businesslike Blue Jean Billy. She throttled down her engine and boldly guided the boat squarely in between two of the higher mounting rocks; then shut off as the keel grated on sandy bottom.

Well did the girl know the place, for several summers of her life had been spent there—back in those happy days when her father had been lobstering with "Portugee" Joe, and before the crooked game began.

"Home again!" she cried, as she sprang ashore.

"You may be right at that," complained the Shanghai Kid, a little resentfully. "Home is where they bury yeh! Hangman's Island! Ugh!"

"Not so bad as that," Blue Jean said, laughing. "We've shaken the coppers, and we will be pretty safe here till we move on. The boat is hidden in those rocks—or will be when I take the mast out of her. And say, Shanghai, who knows, when we cash we may have enough of the worldly stuff to buy us a real craft—one that can shake a leg around twenty-five or thirty—and we can give dad's old boat a rest. Wouldn't that be great?"

The Kid shook his head. "It might for you.

Not me! I'm goin' t' get a new job when we cash. I'm goin' t' th' country. Th' ol' woman always said I was billed t' get drowned—or hung! Huh! Hangman's Island!"

Morning found Blue Jean Billy Race preparing for further devolpments. Suddenly it seemed that her luck was decidedly improved, that is, so far as which way the wind blew. As she had guessed the night before and upon her arrival at Hangman's, it was still beating in from the east, and freshening. It was rolling up a nasty chop now.

The tide, too, was flooding. She could have asked for nothing better suited to her purposes. Her preparations were hurriedly, though painstakingly, performed.

Her first task, as the curtain settled on her final acts, was to get rid of Mr. Algernon W. P. Smythe. He was beginning to get on her nerves anyway. She looked him over and decided that he ought to be good for about ten thousand dollars. Not that she thought he was worth it, but that possibly Muriel, in the early happiness—or unhappiness—of wedded life might think so.

As daylight came, Blue Jean kept a sharp lookout for *Harbor II.* and its searching eyes. Twice she saw it. Once in the distance, as it scurried along, poking into nooks and inlets of the shore line; and once as it passed less than a mile away.

She saw the several pairs of binoculars leveled at the island. The boat slowed and half turned as it worked around in an arc, but, seeing no sign of life

or anything that might be taken for that gray outlaw craft of the night before, it soon continued on its way.

Jean pointed it out to Algernon from the security of one of the huts, as she allowed him the only peek he had had since coming to the place.

"The coppers are making an awful stab at looking for you—and me," she said. "There they go. We're clear over their heads, though."

"But what are you going to do with me?" Algernon asked, as he sailed into the food the girl gave him. His appetite was unspoiled anyway, and that was a good sign.

"Hold you for ten thousand dollars!" Blue Jean stated crisply.

Mr. Smythe gasped, and stopped chewing. The thing took his appetite away.

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"That's the price of admission!"

"Do I have to pay it?"

"I don't care who pays it. Haven't got it in your pocket, have you?"

"N-no," Pinagree asserted dubiously; then said quite seriously: "I've o-only got a little—a few dollars in change."

"Well, save it for yourself!" said the girl, sniffing. "Muriel looks like an expensive piece of ornament. She'll probably be asking you for it when you get home."

"W-when I get *home?*"

"Yes, when your daddy-in-law comes across."

"He'll never do it!" ejaculated Mr. Smythe, moaning dejectedly.

"We'll see!" snapped Blue Jean, as she laid before Algernon a letter she had written; then added: "After you've read that, if you feel like sticking on a postscript, why, fly to it."

Algernon read the penciled writing nervously, and gasped at the audacity of it; then accepted the proffered invitation to add his bit.

Ten minutes later the letter, sealed in a thick, heavy envelope which was addressed to "William de Vanderflip, State Street, City," was tacked to the seat of a small, flat-bottomed skiff that had been on the island. Blue Jean Billy herself pushed the boat into the water, and, with a last kick of her foot, sent it away from the shore.

With the tide flooding for four hours yet, and with the stiff east wind behind it, the drifting boat should reach the mainland by the time the tide was on the turn, or before, if the swifter current of the channels caught it.

Well, Blue Jean knew that people who live along the shore always have eyes for the sea—that a bobbing boat coming in would quickly be seen by some keen observer.

To the envelope she had pinned a ten-dollar bill, with a note, requesting "the finder" to please deliver at once to the address given.

Her task of communication completed, Blue Jean Billy immediately turned her attention to other details of preparation for the game that was to close its pages—with success or failure, she was not sure which, yet—out there in the sea by Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XIII

TEN THOUSAND ASKED

MR. WILLIAM DE VANDERFLIP sat up in his chair and said a great big, long, wicked word. He said is as though he meant it, and with so much gusto that the young lady at the typewriter desk in the outer private office turned pale under her make-up and clapped a hand over one ear.

There was a terrible silence; then others—other bad words that never originated in church.

Mr. de Vanderflip jabbed at a button on his desk and started "hollering."

"Phone to the International Detective Agency! Get Mr. Wood!" he yelled. Mr. de Vanderflip always yelled when he stood to drop a little change, whether it was on the Street or at home. "Have you got him yet? Why not? What are you doing? Have you got him yet? Oh, Lord, why are you so eternally blank-blanked slow? It's life and death! Have you——"

At last the gentleman became winded, and the lady who did chores around the place had a chance to state that Mr. Wood was on the line. What was wanted of him?

"Tell 'im to come up here! Tell 'im to run—or hire a hack—or any blanged-whooped thing! Tell 'im—— Oh, my godfrey! Ten thousand dollars!"

When Robert Wood of the International arrived,

he found William de Vanderflip walking around and around his office, and telling himself stories about hellfire.

It took some minutes for the gentleman to get the same out of his system, to the extent that he could make himself understood.

"I was coming right up, anyway," Mr. Wood stated, as soon as he could make himself heard. "I have considerable news for you,"

"You haven't got anything on me!" bawled the distraught gentleman of wealth. "Nothing on me, I tell you!"

"We got on the track of your son-in-law this morning, and the woman who committed the robbery," the detective went on.

"Nothing on me!" Mr. de Vanderflip wailed. "I've got track of 'em, too!"

"Why, man, calm yourself!" the other said. "You're getting all worked up. We've got to look at this thing in a quiet manner. Now you just take it easy and cool off a little, while I have a few words."

Mr. de Vanderflip had to stop because he was out of breath anyway.

The detective went on: "The whole thing has developed into a nasty mess. Two men have been killed, and we have made three arrests in that connection. The woman who worked at your house night before last is a young lady known as old Quality Bill Race's girl—Blue Jean Billy is the name she is known by.

"I got hold of a dirty pig they call Jersey Pete and tried to make him open up concerning those things I

guessed he might know. I put it up to the whole six of his tribe about giving me a tip if they had anything to sell, and split on the five thousand.

"Bah! What do they do but go out and try to get the stuff away from Blue Jean herself! The fools got all that was coming to them. They ought to have known they would. A woman like that is always too clever for muck such as they are. A certain Baron, the Wop, was killed in the mix-up. Also, a Shaver Michael, who they say was working with old Bill's girl.

"We got to this Blue Jean's rooms just too late to be in on the scrap, but a little after that this Pete, shark hunter, and his two skirts sailed in and gave us a tip that Blue Jean Billy was walking right straight down the street with your son-in-law. She even passed the time o' day with a cop on Buffin Street. Mr. Smythe, of course, was rigged out in some old clothes, so that he looked like a bum she had on the string, or something.

"We got after them hotfoot. But the woman had a boat waiting down at Central Wharf, and she beat us to it by about two hairs. Of course, it had to be a miserable thick night that a searchlight wouldn't go through, and she sneaked out across the Bird Island Flats and disappeared.

"Lord, but she is some clever little lady at that! It will be a big feather in the cap of the man who corners her. We've scoured the whole harbor and water front for signs of her all the forenoon, and there isn't the slightest trace of her or her old gray tub anywhere.

"The only thing I can make out of it is that she

gave the patrol boats down in the channel and at the net the slip, and paddled her canoe straight out to sea. Underwater exhaust and everything. Why, in a fog such as we had last night and early this morning, she could slip by within a hundred yards of 'em.

"If she *is* laying low inside—— Well, all is, I'll take my hat off to old Quality Bill's teachings. Yes, sir!"

"Read that!" blared Mr. de Vanderflip suddenly, coming again into his own, like the Big Wind.

He jabbed a sheet of paper at Mr. Wood.

The detective glanced at it; then cuffed his hat onto the back of his head, while he grabbed for his handkerchief. He moistened his lips, and wiped them off. The letter he held was headed, "Somewhere in the Harbor." The writing was small and neat, and distinctly feminine. It read:

> Dear Mr. de Vanderflip: I have on my hands one Mr. Algernon W. P. Smythe. He is in good condition, with the exception of being a little nervous. He came to me quite by accident. He has been an endless bother and care, and I find it necessary to dispose of him at once.
>
> I am asking a little more for him than I would were I sure what percentage of the jewels of the collection donated by your guests are glass.
>
> I think ten thousand dollars is a fair price for your son-in-law's safe return. You may not think so, though I have no doubt that Muriel will. If you do not care for him, I shall be obliged to set him adrift somewhere east of the

Lightship some time in the future, when his chances will be about fifty-fifty.

One day following that on which you receive this communication, you will take ten thousand dollars in cash and proceed at once to the fishing town of Porgussette, and there make any financial arrangements that may be necessary with John H. Harmon, of the Harmon Radio Research Laboratories, for the use of one of his small, shore-controlled radio boats.

On board of this boat you will secure in plain sight the package containing the money referred to. It shall overhang on the starboard side.

Of course it is entirely optional with you whether you carry out this program or not. Should you decide to comply with the suggestions I have set forth herein, please give the operator at the radio station the following instructions:

The boat will be dispatched at dusk, or coincident with the firing of the sunset guns. Its speed will be normal. Its course will be southeast one point south from Porgussette Light. It will carry only the light necessary for its guidance. The boat will be stopped approximately six miles and one half off-shore. It will remain idle twenty minutes; then may be recalled.

On board you will find directions as to where you may pick up your son-in-law.

I will play this out just as square as you do. Any attempt to capture me—through men concealed on the radio boat, or because of the pre-

arranged presence of other craft in the vicinity —will only bring mourning to your family.

Respectfully yours,

BLUE JEAN BILLY RACE.

P. S.—DEAR FATHER-IN-LAW: In Heaven's name do anything this inhuman fiend suggests. Every moment my life is in danger. The sea yawns before me, her beastly gun behind. Do it for Muriel's sake; for mine. I'll do anything to repay you when I get home—go to work or whatever you think best. The suspense is terrible. I think she is going to drown me. She's a devil. Give my love to dear Muriel and momma. Yours in agony,

'ALGY.

Mr. Wood tossed the letter back on Mr. de Vanderflip's desk, while a strange expression of unrest settled on his countenance.

"Now where the blasted holy pot did you get that?" he wanted to know.

"That," said Mr. de Vanderflip dramatically, "was nailed to the seat of a small boat that came ashore down at Eastern Neck. That's where that came from!"

"Can—you—beat it?" the detective muttered, half to himself.

"Not unless you cough ten thousand dollars, I guess!" said the magnate sarcastically.

It was at this juncture that Muriel, rather weepy around the eyes, and her mother, in a very remarkable state of preservation, entered.

The thing was settled then and there.

Muriel wanted her man Algernon, and Mrs. de Vanderflip wanted the publicity that the remarkably unusual climax would furnish. It was a terrible thing to lose those jewels, but the romantic aftermath was almost worth it. Nothing like it had ever happened before.

"It's settled, then, is it," demanded Mr. de Vanderflip grimly, "that we sell out to the demands of this female devil?"

"I guess that's the safest way," admitted Mr. Wood, "so far as your son-in-law is concerned. After that, we can go at it in an entirely different manner. Every move the police make now will endanger his life. I think that there is but little doubt that Blue Jean Billy Race will carry through her end of it—either way."

That afternoon the De Vanderflips, accompanied by Mr. Wood, boarded a train for Porgussette, there to make the arrangements that their money could buy for this strange communication with the woman Blue Jean, to-morrow.

CHAPTER XIV

BACK TO RAGGEDY ANN

GRAY and bleak was the sea, when at midnight Blue Jean Billy nosed her boat out around the northern end of Hangman's Island and headed east toward Hospital Shoals. Carrying no lights, and logging along at half speed, the sturdy craft moved back over the leg of that course its pilot knew so well.

The night was cold, but there was no sea running. Far shore lights twinkled brilliantly as the clear air enhanced their luster. Channel gas buoys flashed their warning rays of red and white intermittently. The light on the Centurion blazed and died, blazed and died monotonously. The Graves was visible farther out on the edge of the Atlantic. Occasional boats moved here and there, but none molested the gray craft that slipped steadily out into Gran Banan.

It was all of the sea, and Blue Jean Billy Race loved it. True, she had chosen this life of the underworld, but there was something lacking. She could not quite fathom what it was, but it was there, and always insistent. Little did Blue Jean Billy Race dream of that mighty field which was to open to her because of the fact that by chance she had been tossed the temptation and the opportunity to kidnap a gentleman of that world represented in Four Hundred Acre.

At last there came to her ears the crash of waters

on Raggedy Ann. Even in the night she could see the white foam of its surf as it played at the base.

"Raggedy Ann!" she whispered, and so low that none could hear her. "Raggedy Ann, you make me think of an old battered doll I once had. She was a great comfort to me, and her name was Raggedy Ann, too. As I found comfort in her, so I hope to find it in you now—old Raggedy Ann out here on the edge of the sea."

The boat crept in under the high-flung walls of rock, slowly swung clear of a projecting, tattered edge, and let go her hook in this bit of protecting cove, which was shielded round about by a crooked arm of cliffs. Mr. Smythe again had his eyes carefully covered before he was taken from the cabin; then the party went ashore.

Nearly all that day Blue Jean Billy slept, and as the afternoon faded she awoke, refreshed and ready for what was to come. She washed at a pool in the ledge; then prepared their supper, while the Shanghai Kid picked coal from the shore for the Shipmate stove.

The party ate in silence, each with his or her own thoughts. A distant sunset gun boomed; then another. Dusk was already creeping over the water.

Blue Jean took her night glasses and climbed to the high point of Raggedy Ann, while for a long time she studied the sea in every direction. A tug was coming up past the Graves with a tow of barges. A patrol boat was fanning along out to relieve at the third station. A fishing schooner bound for the Banks was shaking out her canvas up off the inner edge of the North Channel.

Thirty minutes passed. Nothing that looked like a police boat appeared anywhere. The only small craft in sight was a ginny fisherman, hanging along in his big dory, inward bound.

Then, far off to the north and east, she could see a black speck on the water. She watched it intently. Yes, it was moving offshore. For several minutes she held her glasses on it; then suddenly slid down from the high pinnacle of rock and hurried toward the beach.

"It's out there!" she called to the Shanghai Kid. "Watch your man and don't let him get that thing off his eyes. Half the game is to take him away from here without his getting a glimpse of the place. If anything happens—— Well, it's up to you. Use your judgment."

A few minutes thereafter, and she was swinging her power boat out and northeast past the Graves. Night had crept close. She opened up the big engine and drove it. She climbed to the forward deck and stood staring through the blackness. Had she lost it? Surely she should see it there somewhere along the surface of the sea. Had her calculations erred concerning the distance?

After all this, was she to be the loser? She shifted the boat's course just a little to the south, and ran for ten minutes. Then, suddenly, something with a slim, tiny mast loomed before her. It was not moving; it had come to rest on the sea. Carefully she circled the strange-looking craft.

"You cute little devil!" she said.

She edged nearer. Sure enough, sticking out from the starboard side was a small package, bound se-

curely on a short arm of wood. She shut off and drifted in close. She removed it, and tied in its place a slip of paper.

At that instant the pecliar purr of some mechanism came to her ears, there was a spatter of white astern, and the wonderful boat began to move. It headed in a slow half circle and moved off into the night—a rakish little plaything, black and almost sinister against the water, while one glittering eye of light winked from a short mast aft.

Blue Jean watched it go, and shook her head slowly.

"You cute little devil!" she repeated. "And all I ever heard of you I read in a Sunday paper. Some bluff!"

She crouched in the cabin of her boat and struck a match; then ripped a corner from the package she held. Yes, it was there. Money! Bills of one-thousand-dollar denomination. She shook her head once more.

"Some bluff! I was going to send him back anyhow!"

Dawn was just beginning to creep into the edge of the sky in the east when Blue Jean Billy opened the switch seven miles east by north from Raggedy Ann, and five miles north of the Lightship.

"Fix those hands up good!" the woman admonished the Shanghai Kid, as she ducked into the cabin. "I'll see to this little bandage over his eyes myself."

"Where—w-what are you going to do with me now?" Algernon wanted to know feverishly.

"You're going home, old-timer!" Blue Jean informed him cheerfully.

A few minutes later he was laid in the bottom of the dinghy. He protested feebly at this.

"Now keep right still," Blue Jean warned him, "and you'll be all right. She's flat as an old saucer out here this morning. We'll keep an eye on you if your gang don't show up on time. They're due here, according to the instructions I sent them, in about an hour. The tide is pretty near low; so you won't drift a great way.

"Keep up your courage and give Blue Jean Billy's love to the family. There you are, all by yourself. So long!"

"S-so l-long!" said Algernon Whosis Pinagree Smythe.

Again back in the little, sheltering cove beneath Raggedy Ann's high-flung head, Blue Jean sighed wearily as she splashed ashore.

Once more she took up her station at the top of Raggedy Ann.

Slowly the sun came up out of the sea. Away off toward the city a white speck appeared. Quickly it came nearer, passing a mile and a half to the northward. It was a sleek and shining steam yacht. It belonged to William de Vanderflip. It was steering a course that would bring it five miles north of the Lightship.

At last, far out there on the blue water, it paused. It had found what it was seeking. A few minutes later it steamed straight out to sea. Muriel and Algernon were beginning their belated honeymoon.

CHAPTER XV

NIX'S MATE

"IT'S a hang of a lookin' boat," said the Shanghai Kid, shuffling a bit uneasily as he eyed Blue Jean Billy's gleaming new pet.

"It's a beauty," corrected the girl enthusiastically. "And, oh, can't she go! Shanghai, did you ever ride forty-five miles an hour on the water—as fast as the Knickerbocker Limited averages between New York and Boston?"

"I don't know," muttered the Shanghai Kid; "I never done much ridin' on the li'le ol' Knickerbock'. About how fast is forty-five miles an hour on a Weehawken' good string uh side-door Pullman's?"

"It's as fast as they would go if they was running away down Shelbourne Hill," said Blue Jean promptly.

"Um-m!" muttered the Kid, scratching his head thoughtfully and backing away a little. "That's goin' some." Then he added: "But I guess probably I ain't goin' t' ride on this festive occasion. I ain't no gull."

"You'll be there, all right," prophesied the girl, with cool assurance. "You'll like it, too."

"Sure—if I do be half lit."

"And there won't be a thing that can touch us—not that the bulls can lay a hand to," Blue Jean continued confidently.

"What do yeh call it? Or don't it come by any callin'?"

"Shanghai, that is a twenty-three foot by six foot, single-step hydroplane runabout; it's mahogany finished and it's powered with a six-cylinder Van Bowman motor, one hundred and thirty-five to one hundred and forty-five horsepower, and turning up around fifteen hundred revolutions for the maximum."

"Huh!" said the Kid. "Kind of a long handle f'r a grubby li'le tub, ain't it? Must come cheap, though."

"The engine cost over three thousand."

"Heaving help us!" muttered Shanghai in awe-struck tones. "What a lot of cush for a runt like that!"

"It was De Vanderflip's money," the girl pointed out. "Some day you'll take off your hat to this same runt of a craft, as you call it. Meet *Nix's Mate,* Shanghai."

Shanghai merely clapped his hand to his forehead and backed away.

"Gadfrey, woman!" he exclaimed; "but you get the most 'propriate handles of any one I ever seen. There's a *Nix's Mate* on th' charts, if you've noticed —and it's covered at high water."

Blue Jean's eyes traveled reflectively from bow to stern of the weather-beaten, storm-battered drab craft on which she stood—the same sturdy boat that had already played its part in the adventures of this strange girl of the underworld.

Then, from the veteran of the sea, her gaze went

down to the sleek and shining flier of the water, tied astern. At length she continued:

"This old boat my father named the *Nix* after the man he bought it of, or maybe it was already named the *Nix;* I don't remember. The name has been painted out these many years, for reasons best suited to the business of keeping outside of the ever-searching hands of the law.

"Not even to you have I revealed the identity of this old boat before. But what would be more appropriate than the name *Nix's Mate* for my new ranger of the blue water?"

"Nothin'—except, maybe, it was ''Elp-us,'" said the Shanghai Kid.

And the gentleman slipped overside. After seeing that the anchor lines leading from the bows of the old boat and its newer sister, which held the power craft off shore, were fast, and the stern lines secured against possible loosening, Shanghai rowed ashore in the dinghy.

And here on the rocky side of this barren isle of the sea—of Raggedy Ann—he prepared for the night in one of the two weather-beaten huts which still remained, a touch of picturesque desertion that marked the biding place of some lone fisherman of long ago.

On the *Nix,* Blue Jean Billy idly watched the going of the Shanghai Kid, while a bit of a smile played about her lips as she listened to his mutterings anent the blooming sea and fools who went down to it—in boats or afoot.

Then at last the girl turned her eyes to where the giant breakers crashed in foamy splendor against

the outer rim of rocks at the base of Raggedy Ann to the east. Dreamily she watched the bleak, gray bordering rim of light that fringed the heavens along the horizon, with its black canopy above.

Once more she found her attention drawn to things within the tiny sheltered cove. She patted the old *Nix* gently; then cast a loving glance at the other contrasting varnished craft, and said slowly:

"You'll do, *Nix's Mate*—splendidly."

Then she retired to the compact quarters of the cabin of the larger boat, where she snuggled into a cozy corner near the shipmate stove.

Slowly, methodically she spread before her yellow, time-stained papers that for many seasons had had the marks of age upon them. For a long time they held her attention to the exclusion of all else—the play of the waters on a rocky shore, the whimper of the wind or the rise and fall of the *Nix,* riding at the end of her anchor line.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COUNTESS ROMANOFF

THINGS were dragging monotonously with the social barons of the Four Hundred Acre régime. There was no new scandal worth mentioning—no murders, no alimony cases, no wives vamping this season. There wasn't an honest-to-goodness title this side of North Square, that the Four Hundred of the Acre knew about. Hence there was nothing to talk about, which contributed to a dull outlook.

And then from nowhere in particular came the Countess Romanoff.

The gang who gave pink teas sat up and opened their arms. The gods were good; they had at last given the élite a prize to struggle for. Who would be the first to win the lady for luncheon on the exclusive list?

The Countess Romanoff registered at the Hotel Copley-Vendome, arriving very quietly and with very little luggage. There was no advance notice of her coming—not even the usual wire reserving rooms—and no other introduction except the firm, round hand of her signature.

"I am an exile of Russia," she explained simply; "your city will be my home for the present. I was educated in wonderful America in those years before my own country became drunk with the blood of its revolutions and treachery. Yes, my husband remains there."

The clerk glanced at the woman's clothes of black and her heavy veil, and understood.

"You will provide me a maid till it can be arranged otherwise?"

"Yes, madam. Surely."

"Thank you."

And such was the coming of the strange and titled woman of royalty—the Countess Romanoff.

She lived almost entirely in the suite that had been assigned to her.

Once she visited a large bank of repute and opened an account and also secured a box in the vault, where she deposited certain packages of valuables.

Later she interviewed a particular real-estate man, who had an office in a building downtown.

She wished, if possible, to secure a house in the city. Not one such as formed a continuous row of brownstone fronts; rather a place by itself.

The agent shook his head. There were such places, but they were not in the city proper. Now something out just a bit——

No, it would not do.

At last the broker scratched his nose.

"There *is* a place," he said finally, but rather doubtfully, "over here on Burchstead Street. Three-story affair, French roof, was a mansion in its day, but is pretty well run down now. I don't know about its—er——"

"Let me see it," said the Countess Romanoff promptly.

Truly the big house on Burchstead Street was beginning to feel the breath of decay, and yet, for

all its dilapidated appearance, there was about the place something that ruin could not overcome.

Amid its surroundings of tenements that huddled close to the tottering iron fences that bounded the spacious yard, with its long untrimmed, lawless shrubbery, there still was that which maintained an air of cold grandeur, undefinable though it was.

An occasional shattered glass, a shutter here and there that hung dejectedly from one hinge, a crooked piazza rail, and flagstones that were crossed this way and that by struggling shoots of yellow-tinted grass—all went to label the old mansion without for what it was, the remains of a once proud home.

Conditions within were, perhaps, just a trifle more encouraging. The woodwork was firm and clean, as far as soundness went; the floors were smooth and even. As a whole the house was worthy of consideration, the countess said.

How soon could the place be made habitable? The real-estate man thought it would take, possibly, a month; there was a good deal to be done and help was scarce. Still he would do the best he could.

"I shall expect that my wishes be granted in any minor details of remodeling that I suggest," the countess explained, "and much of the interior work will be done under the supervision of decorators whom I shall employ."

"It is, of course, a bit unusual," temporized the agent; "it might possibly be necessary that I wire the owners, who have been on the Pacific coast for several years. Nevertheless I believe it can be arranged satisfactorily."

And, true to the gentleman's prediction, everything

was settled promptly, while busy workmen began at once to put the old mansion on Burchstead Street in order for its strange tenant.

In the meantime the news of the titled guest at the Copley-Vendome, through means of a little press publicity, spread quickly, while the countess herself began to receive invitations from the real folks of town.

For a time the titled lady politely refused all offers of society to take her in. She was very tired and wished to rest.

Too, the Countess Romanoff offered no letters of introduction, either of herself or for her credit. People might take her as she presented herself—or not at all. There would be no ifs, ands, or buts. It was entreated that they understand this or leave her painfully alone. She desired no elevated station at their discretion.

Be it understood that though she was a countess she was most democratic, so far as the customs would allow.

In her business dealing she exhibited discretion and keen judgment. What she bought she paid for in hard, cold cash, thereby defeating any arguments that might arise as to the possibility of her ladyship being an adventuress, or, mayhap, some crafty "scratch" artist playing the old peerage gag.

Quiet and unassuming, with slightly gray-streaked hair, features on which were lines that gave indications of having been creased by sorrow, a woman who, it seemed, was aging prematurely, whose years were in the early thirties, but carried still carefully

modeled lines of beauty, together with a lithe, elastic body—such was the Countess Romanoff.

It was not till a few days before the house on Burchstead Street was ready for its titled tenant that the countess accepted an invitation from one of the accredited "blue bloods" of Four Hundred Acre, a Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham.

On this festive occasion Countess Romanoff took it upon herself to announce, or rather confide in Mrs. van Austin-Hingham, that upon a Wednesday of the week following, if Mrs. Van believed it would be agreeable to the kind gentility of her acquaintance, the apartments of the countess would be opened to receive those of gold and purple whom the dear Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham could vouch for.

Would it be asking too much of the kind hostess to assist at the task of choosing the sheep from the goats, when it came to the invitations?

Most certainly it would not be asking too much. It would be an honor; the lady would be tickled half to death. For the task at hand the countess chose well. None knew better than Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham who were the "class" and who were the "ringers" in the high circles.

Then the countess swung to a new tact in her conversation with the haughty lady of the social world.

"And would it—er—be out of place—a little bridge?" she asked softly. "At home it was more the roulette—my husband's favorite. Ah-h, he was a great gambler! I think in myself, too, there is a little of what you call the—the sporting element.

You will pardon, please, if I presume on our short acquaintanceship, my dear Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham."

Mrs. Kent's eyebrows went up for just a flash, while an unholy light crept into her washed-out blue eyes. Her one ripe spot was gambling. The Countess Romanoff had hit her right where she lived. She was something of a sport herself, if she did say it. She rubbed the palms of her hands together with a soft, circular motion.

"Bridge?" she purred, smirking sweetly. "Yes. It was quite the rage in our set till—well, till a few squawkers got hit a little hard and raised something of a fuss in the papers. Surely, countess, now that you have mentioned it, a bit of bridge would be far from amiss. That is, quietly, you understand. Nowadays the papers make so much-to-do about everything. You can't realize how disgusting it is to those of us who only inhabit our own quiet sphere."

"And if the men should care for their national game, poker, I believe, they may?"

"The roulette," interrogated Mrs. van Austin, flushing slightly; "would it not be most fascinating to have a wheel?"

"It too, will be allowed," murmured the gentle countess, bowing her head slightly.

There was a fraction of a moment's pause; then Countess Romanoff added, with just the slightest trace of significant challenge:

"And there will be no limit—and the—er—'house' will pay in gold."

Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham's heart missed four

beats; then went to work eight better than normal. Could she believe her ears? From the season's beginning there had been nothing out of the ordinary to look forward to.

And yet, right out of a clear sky came a quiet countess in black, unheralded, who calmly announced that at her opening reception there would be bridge and poker and a roulette wheel with the hostess backing it with gold.

"That night will see us there," Mrs. van Austin-Hingham told herself, as she begged to be excused a moment. Then hurried off to break the glad tidings to Mrs. Kester Moretonly.

The Countess Romanoff watched the huge rectangle area of the lady's powder-swept back in its going—and shook her head slowly, sadly.

"Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham," she murmured deep within her soul, "came also."

CHAPTER XVII

WATCHING

ROBERT WOOD of the International Detective Agency was sitting on a pierhead at Central Wharf, drubbing his heels aimlessly against the piling, the while he stared dreamily out across the harbor. He was whistling softly to himself.

It was not that Mr. Wood had anything in particular to be cheerful about that he whistled; it was rather that he just had to do something to keep up his spirits or he felt that he would "plop" overboard.

Already Blue Jean Billy Race had proved too much medicine for the headquarters gang in general and Mr. Wood in particular. Trick for trick she had matched her wits against theirs and beaten them a mile. And, strange as it may seem, deep down in his heart Robert Wood had found that really there was no great regret because of his defeat.

Blue Jean Billy Race was inherently a woman of the sea. She was clean and brown and filled with a love of the winds and waters, of all big things out of doors under the blue heavens, and why she should choose to jeopardize her liberty by flashing in and stinging old John Law and then flashing out again, Mr. Wood could not quite savvy.

To be a joke dick in the eyes of Blue Jean would be as bad as the ominous, steely flash in her eyes

should it become his lot to place her under arrest. Mr. Wood believed he would rather face anger than contempt.

Suddenly the officer stopped whistling, while his eyes came to rest on a sturdy gray power boat with a short auxiliary mast, that was breasting its way along on the far side of the harbor.

The gentleman's heels came against the piling beneath him with a bang. Long and earnestly he studied the motor craft. It was towing something that looked like a small float—or, perhaps, a small lighter. Whatever it was, it was pulling hard.

"By gorry!" exclaimed the dick, scrambling to the wharf proper. "That looks like the description of a certain mysterious gray craft that has been associated with Miss Billy Race. Twice she has impudently cruised straight up in here and literally defied us to bottle her up—cut off her retreat from the paths of the sea she knows so well.

"Holy Dinah! An old gray tub like that—or one mighty similar. It isn't possible, though. She's too clever for that—coming in here in broad daylight. That's taking too big a chance altogether. Just the same, I'm going to make it my business to look this boat over at close quarters."

This little thing Mr. Wood did. He found the boat tied alongside a landing float at the Miller's River Basin draw. To a pier across the channel was the strange, square raft that the gray power craft had had in tow.

It was about thirty feet in length by something like fifteen in width, riding high in the water, to an extent that would suggest boxes or pontoons

supporting its roughly boarded superstructure. Its uses might have been any of many. Now it was considerably dilapidated, and appeared to be on about its last legs so far as usefulness went.

There was no sign of life aboard the power boat itself, except for a thin wisp of blue wood smoke that trailed upward from the stubby chimney pipe that protruded through the roof of the cabin.

"Ahoy! Aboard the boat there!" called the dick.

Came mutterings from within. At length the hatch was shoved back enough to allow of a man's head poking into the scene. It was a sturdy head, capped by a mop of tousled hair and grimy toque, while the mouth was set firmly in about two thirds of a loaf of "ginnie" bread.

"Well-yo-o! What's a da mat?"

"What boat is that?"

A pitiful expression came over the unshaven face of the man in the cabin, while it made an expressive grimace.

"She's belong to Gus da gin-n-nay. What-a-you-want?"

"Where'd you get it? Where'd you buy it? Who from?"

"Toe-nay da Frank somet'ing—I dunno."

"Is there anybody beside you on board?"

"Shoor! Looie Trifio. Don' bother no more."

And the head subsided, while the hatch closed with a bang.

Mr. Wood grunted. "That's all right, wop," he muttered, "but that tub is going to come under surveillance of one of our operatives right off the bat. I don't know who you are or where you come

from, but I don't believe you, anyhow—and when Billy Race is in the points *nothing* is impossible; therefore everything is good for one bet at least—everythng that looks suspicious a little bit."

Thirty minutes later a gentleman relieved Mr. Wood. Whether the boat belonged to Billy Race or not, the dick was taking no chances. He gave certain stringent instructions that had to do with keeping tabs on things around there.

"Lie low and watch out," directed Mr. Wood. "I'll send another man down by and by. I'm going uptown to see if I can locate anything. And, say, you'd better stick around O'Riorden's place at the end of the bridge! That's in case I should want to get hold of you. Something unforeseen may turn up. Savvy the dope?"

"Yes, sir.

"O. K. See you later."

"So long."

Nobody seemed to know exactly where the information came from, first hand. Swiftly from somewhere below the dead line the news was passed around quietly that Blue Jean Billy was in town.

Headquarters got it from a stool pigeon, and took it for what it was worth and passed it on to Wolfe and McKinnon, who at once concentrated their efforts along the lanes of the underworld. Robert Wood also found a ready gentleman who had something on his mind.

Hence it was that not only was Wood, of the International Agency, scouring the city for a trace

of Blue Jean, but Wolfe and McKinnon, two of the best detectives that headquarters had.

Again, not only were the dicks keeping an eye peeled for the elusive little lady of the sea, but several men and women of the "good peoples" contingent. There were a lot of them who had found that first-hand information had a commercial value, was practically ready money.

At Mike, the Barber's, "ink pot" or at Bosillipo's place, or at several other similar dives, there were spineless sycophants always to be found who would sell a man's—or a woman's—soul for a tiny, round, glittering piece of gold in their palm.

Every rat below the dead line was a detective on his own hook. Stooling old Quality Bill's girl would hold its own richly deserving reward, and if there was any trouble with their conscience—two drinks of Bosillipo's whisky would make them forget that they ever had such a thing.

Somewhere in the lanes of the city they knew so well Blue Jean Billy and the faithful Shanghai Kid silently watched and waited patiently, while with calm content they observed many earnest attempts on the part of cheap "fawny men" and corrupt "badger workers" and "prop getters" and such trash to locate those artists who played the game always with a wealth of brainy resourcefulness.

What Robert Wood had discovered for himself he said nothing about. However, if there had been any doubts in his mind earlier as to the ownership of the gray auxiliary they were dispelled now.

He felt absolutely positive that it was no idle rumor of the underworld that Quality Bill's girl

was in town. Too, he believed that it would be of little advantage to seize that mysterious craft that was tied up at the Miller's River draw. It was the last thing to expect that either Blue Jean or the Shanghai Kid would be found aboard.

The birds had flown before he got there, possibly had not even been aboard when the boat came into the harbor. The gentlemen of foreign birth who were temporarily in possession might be in the plot, or they might be just a plant.

At best there was nothing to be gained by a too peremptory movement, which might only spoil the whole thing. Enough was chalked against his good judgment as it was.

But he would put a man under cover to watch that power boat night and day. Then he would go one better than that. He would also secure the services of a fast boat to be held in readiness for instant orders.

Mr. Wood saw that these things were carried out to his satisfaction; then sat him down in a quiet place to dine. And while he ate he pondered deeply, earnestly—where, when would Blue Jean Billy Race strike next?

CHAPTER XVIII

NARROWING LINES

THE old mansion on Burchstead Street was aflame with light. The whole place was dressed in gay attire, quite as though celebrating a return to state from near dereliction. And not alone was it the place itself that lent an air of fashionable associations to-night.

At frequent intervals huge, glittering limousines rolled to the curb and set down sleek members of Four Hundred Acre's best families—haughty ladies and gentlemen, from whom radiated wealth, position, righteousness.

In the grand old reception hall of the house on Burchstead Street, the Countess Romanoff, calm, stately, received her guests with quiet grace.

"Ah-h, Mrs. van Austin-Hingham! So kind of you to come."

"Charmed, Countess Romanoff! Meet Mrs. Vincette Craymonthe."

"De-e-lighted, countess!" replied Mrs. Craymonthe, smirking extensively.

"Jove! Mighty pleased, countess!" gurgled a red-faced gentleman who once had driven a truck, and now owned a dozen factories. He had with him a bundle of kale that would have choked a horse, with which the old boy planned to clean up on that roulette thing.

"Oh, dear countess," said a thin feminine person of the drooping variety, "I want to express to you my sympathy for the sorrows of your poo-r-r country, which must have caused you, oh-h, such fathomless grief!"

And so it went. And still they came.

Cold beads of perspiration were beginning to appear at the edges of Countess Romanoff's forehead, but with the able assistance of Mrs. van Austin-Hingham that end of it was done at last. The gang was all there—and some jewel-bedecked gathering.

The countess withdrew for a moment to the shelter of a bit of greenhouse shrubbery, and sighed. Also, she dabbed away the moisture on her brow and powdered up again to her normal whiteness. Already society was beginning to get on her nerves. Affairs at the Russian courts were so different.

From a bowered nook the plaintive strains of music floated forth. Countess Romanoff breathed a bit more freely. Her eyes trailed out across the gathering from Four Hundred Acre.

Groups chatted here and there, the murmur of their voices droning along monotonously, regardless of the efforts of the musicians. Some of the men centered their attention about that table in a room beyond, where rested the fascinating wheel of fortune known as the roulette.

The solid ex-truck driver poked at it with a pudgy forefinger; then spun it gingerly, chuckling as he did so. Piled along one side of the table on a strip of green velvet were neat little stacks of gold coins.

A friend of the red-faced man eyed them curiously, and smiled.

"They say the countess is going to back the wheel the limit," he said.

His companion glanced about warily; then he chuckled.

"That's the idea, I believe. I got it from Mrs. van Austin-Hingham. Huh! Why, say, I nearly broke the bank of Monte Carlo the last time I was in Europe."

"Going to play it a bit to-night then, I take it?"

"H'm! Well, I came prepared to make the hostess step some. And I'm no piker."

"Say," demanded a third gentleman, a Mr. Barker by name, who joined the two plutes at this point, "who is this countess? Anybody know? Appears to be a more or less mysterious personage, meek and lowly and all that; very retiring, but it seems that we should have heard something of her through the papers? Eh?"

"Um!" muttered the stout gentleman. "Just so! But," impressively, "far be it from me to question her ancestry so long as she backs the little wheel with gold."

"Something in that," acknowledged Mr. Barker, who had made his pile in stocks. Then suddenly he made a whispered suggestion. "Here, why not make a little pool of this thing—all on the q. t. and everybody get together to break the bank? What do I hear?"

"Not that I need any help, or anything like that," grunted the large man who had brought his roll; "but not a bad idea at all. Barker, you are appointed a committee of one to feel out the gentlemen present

who think they'll try their luck, and get their views about coming in or not."

"Done!"

"See you in the smoking room before the game starts."

The women of the affair, keenly critical as always, had found the appointments of the old house all that could be asked. Surely it was a wonderful example of what could be done with an old place, and the decorations were superb, and what a charming soul was the countess—*but!*

And then in pairs and trios and groups, in sly, soft wordings the criticisms began. For all a countess she was a bit dowdy. Imagine, too, she was going to preside at the roulette! And the eyes on her. Had any one ever noticed that terrible ice-cold flash that came at times, quite as though the best of Four Hundred Acre were worthy only of contempt?

But for all that, a countess was a countess, and not to be sneezed at in the mad social world. It assisted materially to be enabled to add one of the nobility of the continent to a person's calling list. So it came to pass that the Countess Romanoff entertained most lavishly the cream of Four Hundred Acre at the old mansion on Burchstead Street.

Gilson of the *Daily News* was lounging up against a post in Newspaper Row when Mr. Robert Wood came by.

"Hi, Wood!" the newspaper man greeted him. "Why so glum? You look as though you were coming from a wake—or going to one."

"Hello, Gilson!" acknowledged the dick. "Yes;

maybe I do look like a funeral. I feel like one, anyhow—my own, for all the good I seem to be lately as a sleuth."

"Ar-hah! Watson, the needle! Our hero has become fainthearted."

"Say, Gilson, do you remember Blue Jean?"

"Old Quality Bill's girl?"

"The same."

"Well, I should smile."

The detective paused a moment, as though to give effect to what he was going to say.

"Blue Jean Billy Race is back in town again!"

"Gosh! What an interview that would make! S-some story! Say, Wood, haven't got any idea where I could get hold of her, have you?"

"Well, if I had, Gilson, you can bet your sweet life I wouldn't be hanging around here on one foot, chinning to you. That's just the grief. I've combed this confounded burg, and, while I am positive that she is here, I can't find the faintest trace of her."

"It isn't to be expected that you would," said Gilson; "not after the way she has shown the coppers up on her previous visits. Such is life. Now I've got to go up and tickle the old typewriter—some Sunday bosh about a Russian countess. Sort of sob stuff. Count killed by the Reds—executed or something—and his grief-stricken wife's flight out of Siberia—Vladivostok to Yokohama to Vancouver, and so on.

"Funny thing, too. Regular clam. Talks United States all right, says she was educated here, didn't say where. Regular enough, but, seems like a most mysterious person. Hard to get an interview with

her; harder still to get any connected story, but I'm doing the best I can for the feature section out of what I have pried loose."

"Countess, eh?" said Mr. Wood, showing no particular interest. "Countess what?"

"Romanoff. Countess Romanoff. Been staying at the Copley-Vendome, but has been having a town house fixed up; going to be a regular person before she's done, I guess. Our society man came in a little while ago; says they are pulling off a real splurge over on Burchstead Street. Told me on the q. t. that it looks like *some* time. Nothing for publication, you understand, but a little mazum flying around loose—bridge, got a roul——"

"Hey-y!" Robert Wood, who had not been listening as intently as he might have, merely enough to be polite, suddenly found the name Burchstead Street drfting around in the general maze of stuff the reporter was saying. "Over where did you say they were runnng this highbrow poker party?"

"Man, dear, you nearly gave me apoplexy hollering that way," remonstrated Mr. Gilson. "Over on Burchstead Street, I said; the old mansion house that's been empty so long—made a regular place out of it."

Mr. Wood was at once a new man. He glanced hurriedly about them; then danced in front of Mr. Gilson.

"Gilson, you blind, staggering old thickhead, I've been a consummate ass!"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Never mind what you beg! You wanted an in-

terview with Blue Jean Billy Race, didn't I hear you say?"

"That's what!"

"And you have been admitted to the presence of this Countess Romanoff—have interviewed *her?*"

"Say, now, what to——"

"Great gad, man! Gilson, can't you see it? You've had your chance! *You have interviewed Blue Jean Billy Race!*"

"The Countess Romanoff is——"

"Blue Jean Billy! And I've scoured the underworld and all its lanes of this city with a fine-tooth comb for her. Over my head—way over! All the time she has been playing her part in the Four Hundred circles—as a countess! O-o-o-oh!"

"Somebody has gone blooie around here," said Mr. Gilson, flushing up a bit, and scratching his ear. "I haven't had a drink to-night! What have you had, Woodsy?"

"Here! Quick, man! Listen! It came over me like a flash!"

"I guess it must have," said the reporter dryly.

"The connection between your mysterious countess and that old house on Burchstead Street. Why, great Scott, it was that same old ruin that the girl used as a prison for William de Vanderflip's son-in-law in that interval between the time she disappeared downtown here and the night she slipped away out to sea.

"Didn't old Quality Bill live at No. 19 Green Street, which backs up squarely to the rear of that old mansion? Hasn't that shack been surrounded by crooks and mystery ever since it was closed up?

Who'd pick it out for a winter home, anyhow? Who but somebody with a motive for crooked work? Bah!"

"And I," said Gilson, pointing the forefinger of his right hand at the third button on his vest. "Me—have really interviewed the famous Blue Jean and didn't know it?"

"I guess you have. Anyway, that's my summing up of things just at this minute. Furthermore, if my health holds out I'm going down to Burchstead Street just as quick as I can get a taxi to turn a wheel."

Mr. Wood hopped out into the main thoroughfare and glared both ways, and then started trotting up a side street toward one of the downtown hotels. There was nothing in sight.

"*Is* there even a wandering wreck in the blasted town to-night?" muttered the dick. "Taxi!" Losing considerable patience, he charged the uniformed gentry at the hostelry's entrance.

This personage blew sharply on a whistle, and promptly a car slued around the corner. It was still moving when Detective Wood bundled himself in through the door.

"Burchstead Street!" he shouted at the driver.

"And stop where it enters Church Green!" supplemented another gentleman who flung himself in close behind the dick. "There's no need to go flourishing right up to the front door, hurrah-for-Halifax," the second comer added wisely.

"Are you armed?" demanded the detective, as the machine went into high with a jerk.

"Sure!" responded Mr. Gilson. "With a pencil."

"Well, if it is Blue Jean Billy that is entertaining

to-night on Burchstead Street you are going to need something better than that. Remember, I've already suffered defeat at her hands twice, and, in all probability, the Shanghai Kid will be in the scene, too."

"Bad actor?"

"Not exactly a killer, but I allow he is a savage fighter when he is cornered—or when the girl is in danger. Shanghai and old Quality Bill were pretty close friends, and you can depend on it that the Kid isn't one to surrender a trust lightly. They tell me he's like a brother to the girl."

"So look out for trouble, eh? That is, if your conclusions follow out."

"They're going to follow out!" asserted Mr. Wood positively. "And just to show you how sure I am that—thanks to meeting you—I stumbled on one of the cleverest schemes by one of the cleverest criminals this city has ever known, I am going to put a cordon of police around that house before I make a move."

"Thanks," murmured Mr. Gilson; "I was going to suggest something like that. While I would find a great deal of pleasure, I presume, in an interview with Miss Blue Jean, I don't think it is to-night that I am anxious for an appointment."

"You may have a chance at that," snapped the International man; "but it will probably be up at headquarters."

CHAPTER XIX

THE WORLD TUMBLES

NOTHING ever terminated more abruptly and with a greater degree of dissimilitude than did the social program in the house on Burchstead Street.

The time was close to eleven o'clock. The little pool of financiers had played up to their highest expectations. They had "broken the bank." The little stacks of gold pieces were gone from the strip of green velvet, and were jingling merrily in the jeans of those autocrats of Four Hundred Acre who were present in all their solid, self-satisfied conceit.

The ladies were not all as well pleased with their evening at the Countess Romanoff's. Some had lost heavily in their turn at bridge; others who had played in better luck were contrastingly jubilant.

Ices were being served. The orchestra was droning some sort of plaintive melody. The Countess Romanoff, for the moment, was standing a bit apart from her guests, apparently observing that the servants performed their duties properly. On the surface it would seem that the titled hostess was entirely engrossed with the task of being a sort of benign godmother to the whole glittering throng.

However, if any of the sleek and mighty had taken that moment to observe closely the quiet lady by the ferns, they would have been electrified by the sudden transformation in those strange eyes of hers.

The large, red-faced ex-truck driver, looking strangely out of place with a plate of tinted sherbet in one huge paw and a diminutive cookie in the other, seeing the countess unoccupied for the moment, approached. He couldn't resist the temptation to hand out a little kidding along the lines of her loss.

Not that the jest was exactly called for, but it wasn't like the man that the lady escape unscathed for presuming to enter the gambling field in opposition to experienced old rounders like himself. That was Mr. McNulty—a brilliant winner, but a bad loser.

"Well, countess, all your little horseshoes were upside down to-night, what?" The gentleman jingled the gold in his pocket, having laid the cookie to rest.

The woman did not answer. Mr. McNulty began poking at the sherbet with the undersized spoon with which he had been provided. He was not looking at the countess' eyes or he would not have gone on.

"Do you know, sometimes I have qualms of conscience when it comes to winning money from a lady? It is so much like robbing a kid's bank."

Mr. McNulty glanced at the countess with a smirk —and the smirk froze with a promptness that, at another time, would have been most amusing.

The red-faced man was looking straight into the deepest, coldest gray eyes that he had ever seen. It was like gazing into the depths of blue ice. That look was ominous in its intensity.

If such a thing was possible, Mr. McNulty's face got redder than ever. Then he dropped his eyes.

The sherbet that he had been dabbling at went to

the floor with a sloppy crash. Then something akin to the grunt of a pig was breathed from his half-open mouth.

Trained on a line with the bottom of visibility of the starched expanse of his shirt front was the cold, black muzzle of an automatic pistol.

There was a tense moment, then from somewhere in the brilliantly lighted room a woman screamed.

The eyes of the Countess Romanoff swept the assemblage, cool, calculating, challenging, and as she slowly reviewed the guests of the evening, so also did the muzzle of the rod follow in ranging accompaniment.

Said the countess quietly:

"There will be no occasion for further hysterical demonstrations. Try to remember you are ladies and gentlemen and hold yourselves above petty emotion. Let us at last become better acquainted."

"Haw!" said Mr. McNulty briefly, starting to laugh, then clamping his lips shut as the artillery once more swung into line with his white shirt front. The sweat was already beginning to burst into tiny drops on his forehead. He gulped in a bit of breath, and tried again.

"Why—er—countess, how you startled me! What —wh—at—wh——" Which was as far as the gentleman got. It was as far as he could go.

"I am not a countess, or a Romanoff, or anything else—except exactly what you see." The woman was speaking very slowly. Time with her, it appeared, was of no special object. She went on: "I am Blue Jean Billy Race!"

Several startled exclamations partially sprang to

life, and were as quickly smothered. The woman continued, unheeding:

"Some of us, I believe, were fortunate enough to have met at the Smythe's, out on the hill."

"Water!" called a lady at a far table. "Mrs. van Austin-Hingham has swooned."

At the robbery at the Smythe's Mrs. van Austin had suffered a very great loss—a necklace of pearls of great value, to say nothing of associations—she had practically acted in the capacity of sponsor for the Countess Romanoff—and such was her reward. It was altogether too much, so she just fainted, with a sad, sickening little *ufh!*

"Say," demanded the resolute Mr. Barker of State Street, "don't you think this joke has gone far enough?"

"Yes," agreed Blue Jean promptly. "Step three paces to the front—and *dig!*"

"Dig?"

"That's the answer. You've had your fun, haven't you—been a naughty, reckless man with your money? Now you can pay the court."

"You mean this is a holdup?"

"Speaking in the vernacular of the place you choose to call the underworld, it is something a little softer than 'porch climbing.' Shanghai, show the gentleman where his money is!"

The room, or rooms, in which the guests were gathered consisted of a huge dining hall connected with the great living room by massive folding doors which were swung to their limit, to form practically one gigantic reception hall.

The entrance hall and the stair hall both opened

on the living room, though each was a unit in the setting of their own. Two large adjoining alcoves, it might be explained, were divided by a partition. A person in the stair hall could not be observed by one entering the entrance hall. The stairs themselves, leading to the floor above, were circular, inclosed below in heavy, hardwood paneling.

Blue Jean occupied a position close to the stairs, which post gave her command of the entire gathering. Large ferns on low stands bounded her on either side. With the exception of Mr. McNulty, who was floundering around in the spilled sherbet, having neither the desire to advance on the foe nor any inclination to turn his back full and wide on that silent muzzle, the girl occupied a space somewhat apart from her guests.

And yet, now she spoke in a low voice to an unseen personage, whom it would appear from his title of application, was not among the invited guests, so far as the ladies and gentlemen of Four Hundred Acre knew.

There was a movement, slight and sinister, close behind the woman and the sheltering ferns, a quick step and—before almost unbelieving eyes—a figure was belligerently charging Mr. Barker.

Credit must be given the Shanghai Kid. It was the only time in all his life that he had mingled in society. There was plenty of chance for diversion and distraction from duty, but first of all Shanghai was a business man.

This was proved by the thoroughness and the promptness with which he relieved Mr. Barker of that gentleman's worldly goods, so far as ready

money was concerned. No dip ever did a neater job. And, while the Kid might not have been able to "reef a leather" in a subway crush, he was good on just plain grabbing what was there.

"And now, Mr. McNulty," directed Blue Jean when the broker was cleaned.

"Who's that guy?" Shanghai wanted to know, glaring about him, blinking a bit as the glare of the lights got in his eye.

"Right there in the sherbet."

"Looks like uh truck driver," muttered the Kid. "How'd he get in?"

"If you lay a finger on me"—Mr. McNulty foamed suddenly, as his gaze took in the unlovely visage of the Shanghai Kid—"I'll—I'll—I——"

"One yip more out uh yeh," proclaimed the other aggressively, "an' I'll hang a shanty on yeh eye!"

The Kid promptly, and without the slightest hesitation, went to work on Mr. McNulty to the extent of a fat roll and a fistful of double eagles.

"And the tall skinny gentleman with glasses, Shanghai. He came exceptionally well prepared to see the bank for a few."

"George Stackpole, as I live!" said Shanghai. "Pass it down, 'Long and Handsome.'"

A fourth gentleman flushed and swore profusely, and called on some one "for Heaven's sake to do something besides sit there and tamely submit to this unheard-of outrage."

"Yeh, ought to be ashamed of yehself," the Shanghai Kid proclaimed, dipping deep and fishing forth a bundle of the ugly green. "Ain't yeh got no respec'

for the' ladies, or nothin', yeh big fathead? Bow'ry manners at a Lizzie jam! Shut up, yeh big stiff!"

"And now the ladies," directed Blue Jean when the men were done, a contemptuous little smile showing around her mouth. "They panned me when I was a countess, so I guess they'd pan me, anyway."

Mrs. Kent van Austin-Hingham came out of one faint, got a look at the Shanghai Kid, who in his palmiest days had never been much to look at, and went into another, taking Mrs. Keasley Huntington with her.

But right here Shanghai balked.

"Not me on th' wimmen!" he objected, taking a hurried survey of the fair sex. "Not me on th' wimmen, Billy."

Blue Jean Billy Race found no compunction in her heart when it came to relieving the ladies of their jeweled trinkets, or of taking their little bundles of toadskins. Even Mrs. van Austin-Hingham awoke later to discover that the Countess Romanoff was no respecter of persons.

However, there were several present who were more fortunate. Time had played in their favor.

Somewhere outside, a flagstone that was a bit loose canted sharply. The disturbing note was neither preceded nor followed by footsteps, which was most suspicious in itself, especially to those ears which were ever listening for those discordant sounds that betray the presence of persons undesired.

Others heard it, too—that strange click of stone, as though of an incautious footstep by a stealthy intruder. A gentleman of the evening, a Mr. Heffner Prebble baptismal right, who had earlier partaken

of a little red-rum courage, suddenly decided he would retire.

He looked around, got his eye on a door that was not too far off, and then, just as gracefully as a setter pup, but with a lot more speed, withdrew from the picture. This uncalled-for hubbub brought Mrs. Keasley Huntington out of a dead faint, from which she immediately went into a fit of hysterics that was nothing short of a fair imitation of a steam calliope on a bat.

There was a sudden command somewhere outside, and a savage crash against the front door.

"Here come the bulls, Shanghai," said Blue Jean calmly.

"Jest as I should s'spect," that individual stated without emotion.

With the prospects of reënforcements, courage began to flow again in the veins of the gentlemen in evening clothes.

Mr. Barker got behind Mr. McNulty and shoved this individual into the pathway of the retreating Shanghai Kid, at the same time lunging viciously for the Kid's jaw with a hard-swung right.

Be it understood that the Shanghai Kid was not covering his retreat with artillery; had not, in fact, presented a gat since his appearance. Even in the present precious moments he did not resort to that black automatic that was tucked away beneath an armpit.

The Kid was not a gun fighter, and till the lines were close and merciless he preferred, as he explained, to take his chances in the brawl with his two li'le ol' lunch grabbers.

Being unable to retalliate as concerned Mr. Barker, Shanghai did the next best thing as opportunity presented. He put his body behind a short jolt to the pit of Mr. McNulty's stomach, laid the palm of his left against the front of the gentleman's red face and pushed.

Not having a very good footing anyway, the ex-truck driver suddenly found himself crashing into Mr. Barker like the fall of Rome, while together the gentlemen flopped over a bridge table, into a gorgeous wreck among a little group of ladies.

At the foot of the winning stairs Blue Jean was standing. She was tense, poised.

"All right, Shanghai," she called, noting the attitude of her assistant, who it appeared was all at once possessed of the desire to wade in and make it a real fight; "come on."

The Kid hesitated, facing the group of men beyond threateningly.

"Never'll get another chanct like this to drape somethin' on a bunch uh hard-boiled eggs," he lamented.

Then came a rush of fresh air as the door in the entrance hall was flung open. On the threshold stood Robert Wood—a huge, blue automatic covering his line of advance. Close behind him was a big harness bull.

Almost the first person the dick saw was the Shanghai Kid, scarcely a dozen feet away, backing toward the stair hall and Blue Jean, who as yet was out of the range of vision of the men in the doorway.

Instantly Mr. Wood recognized his man.

"Put 'em up, Shanghai!" he ordered. "The job is all off."

The eyes of the officer ranged the two great rooms swiftly, searching for the face of that woman who he knew must be there. He advanced suddenly.

"Look out!" shrilled several voices in unison.

Robert Wood half hesitated for an instant—and found himself face to face with the daughter of old Quality Bill. Also, he was face to face with a leveled automatic. But the detective smiled.

"Miss Race," he said coolly, "you are trapped. You may choose to put up a fight, which would be very much like you; but I warn you. To-night all the odds are with me. This house is surrounded by police. There are officers at every door. There is even a man on the roof."

The detective glanced significantly at the stairs, which were so close behind Blue Jean; then smiled a bit grimly.

A woman began blubbering. Mrs. Keasley Huntington had screeched herself out of breath, and now was gasping like a fish out of water—her mouth flopping open and shut without any sound. The men began whispering nervously among themselves.

It looked like a fight. Gadfrey! What a woman! Look at her—not a quiver. Marble on a frosty morning. And the man, a twisted little grin on his lips, was edging himself between Blue Jean and the officer.

Yes—several caught themselves shuddering at the thought of it—somebody was going to get hurt. There would be bloodshed surely if the officer tried to take this strange, cold woman into custody. It

was in her eyes that she would never suffer the ignominy of steel on her wrists, or the steel of imprisonment on her soul. Almost unconsciously there was a concerted moving back away from the leading actors in the scene.

Strangely enough it was the Shanghai Kid, still failing to make any attempt at a draw, still wonderfully cool and cynical, who addressed the detective. He had worked his way squarely in front of Blue Jean. Still her gun peeped past the corner of his right elbow.

"Mister man, yeh might just as well call off that howitzer now as any time. Crown th' kink, fer it's our move. Yeh can let Shanghai have it—that's your choice. Only r'member ol' Bill's girl is right behind me with a fis' full uh lead."

It was a nervy trick. Robert Wood knew as well as he knew the difference between bluff and cold, stark certainty, that the Shanghai Kid meant every word he said. The minute he opened on the protector of the girl, Blue Jean Billy would fire past the Kid as quick as lightning strikes.

Somewhere behind him a voice addressed the dick.

"What do you say, Wood; hadn't you better come out and let us rush the place? You'll get it if you try to make the 'flop' alone. Look out!"

Mr. Wood did not reply to the voice of the officer without. He looked the Shanghai Kid square in the eye.

"Boy," he said, "you'd better go easy; this is a desperate game. Between you, you may get me; you may get the next man, but there's no escaping.

You're in a trap. Don't start anything that's going to put a halter around your neck."

The air of the place was tense with that gripping premonition of tragedy. The dick went on:

"Billy Race, you're beaten. Don't go into the prisoner's cage with murder hanging over you. Quit the game and take your medicine. I've got you fair and square, and there will never be any escaping from this house for you. What do you say—take your arrest quietly, or has there got to be some blood spilled? If it's fight, I'm ready."

"I'm sorry, my friend," said the girl evenly, "but your cards and mine are on opposite sides of the table, and I am not laying down my hand yet. It's a fight!"

Another member of society turned white, shuddered and slipped off the edge of her chair under a table. Some of the male members of the party were clumsily attempting to soothe the shattered nerves of the weaker sex. But the setting of the stage now was not conducive to anybody's peace of mind—not with a shooting, and perhaps a couple of murders hanging by a thread.

The Shanghai Kid held his ground. Robert Wood began to advance slowly—almost inch by inch—alert, grim. He nestled the handle of his automatic a bit firmer in his palm; then paused a moment.

Voices came through the open door from the street. Passers-by had seen the police; a crowd was gathering. The thick voice of a patrolman ordered them to move on. The officer on the steps, a gat in his hand, whispered something to the hoofer in the doorway.

The latter did not reply; he was watching Mr. Wood. His armament, too, was unlimbered. To tell the truth, the gentleman was not exactly sure himself what was the proper method of procedure at this interesting stage of the crisis. So he merely made a movement with his free hand that was an elegant *"Sh-h-h!"* and held his breath.

Behind the screen of the Shanghai Kid's back, Blue Jean was very slowly elevating the muzzle of her pistol—bit by bit, till it centered exactly on a tiny, square recess in the partition that divided the stair hall and the entrance hall. The thing itself was glass covered and about the size of the "key compartments" on a fire-alarm box.

The detective's eyes glimpsed that sinister movement of the girl's arm, caught its elevation, and, almost unconsciously, allowed his gaze, for the merest fraction of a second, to follow its direction.

In that instant the gun in the hand of Blue Jean spat and many things happened.

As quickly as the action of a camera's shutter the house on Burchstead Street was shrouded in utter darkness.

Just as quickly Mr. Wood, who was not exactly sure what manner of ruse was being pulled off, let go with his own weapon, in the general direction of that spot where he had last seen the Shanghai Kid and Miss Blue Jean Billy—a locality scarcely eight feet from where he had been standing.

Also, the gentleman in uniform who had been occupying a position in the doorway came upstage and contributed a couple of shots on his own account.

Somewhere Mr. Barker of Four Hundred Acre

had read that the proper thing to do under circumstances of this nature was to lie down flat. He proceeded to do this little thing with a promptness that was remarkable. After which he yelled sturdily for everybody else to lie down.

He hoped that somebody would fall on top of him; he would feel safer. Mr. McNulty did, and Mr. Barker was satisfied. He hoped, however, that it was not going to be a long war because the large, red-faced gentleman was lying mostly on his neck.

The hitherto "very nice" ladies came to earth with a flop, but not without at last giving vent to a series of outbursts that represented temperamental emotions.

Rëenforcements came promptly; came from the front, rear, and sides, came swiftly and with determination.

With a bound Robert Wood of the International Detective Agency had hurled himself forward. Clutching vainly at that portion of the blackness where Shanghai and Blue Jean had been, he collided with a fern, stumbled, then went thundering into that paneling which encased the circular stairs leading to the floor above.

As soon as it was possible, emergency lights were provided, for it was found that the entire lighting system of the house was dead. At some length a sort of order was restored, so far as such a thing was possible under the circumstances.

Then began the search—a search that was not ended at daybreak, for in the house on Burchstead Street there was no trace of either the Shanghai Kid or Blue Jean Billy Race. They had faded into the night.

CHAPTER XX

JOHN LAW'S NETS

"THAT you, Billings?" It was the voice of Robert Wood, booming over the telephone to the operative who had been watching the mysterious gray boat at the Miller's River draw.

"Yes," came the reply.

"That boat at the draw. Anything new?"

"Not a thing."

"Anybody left there, or been snooping around?"

"No. Nobody. The wops have been putting on supplies and baiting about a dozen tubs of trawls. That's all."

"Well, from now on, watch that craft every second. I'll be down myself as soon as I can. Tell Murray, when he comes to relieve you, to go to Battery Wharf and tell the engineer on the *Comet* to keep his engines warmed up till he hears from me to the contrary. Understand?"

"All right, Mr. Wood."

"Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid have put something over on us," Wood continued. "They may show up there any time. Watch for a rowboat. You've got to act like lightning; that woman is a witch. I was within ten feet of her, and she's gone! Heaven knows how or where! Don't let the gray boat leave the float. Better go down there."

"All right."

"Goo'-by!"

It was a little after midnight. Detective Wood and the police were beside themselves. The thing was almost unbelievable. It wasn't human, that was all. It was true that Blue Jean Billy was clever and daring, but it was not to be conceded that she had powers other than those of flesh and blood.

And yet her escape from the very clutches of the body of men who had surrounded the house on Burchstead Street was something to make the gentlemen working on the case pause and pinch themselves to see if they were awake. It was bad business. Something must be done.

To this both Mr. Wood and Mr. Gilson, of the *Daily News,* agreed.

The reporter and the detective were making a minute examination of the interior of the house on Burchstead Street.

"Whew!" commented the newspaper man. "A regular Spartan—standing there with her gat, and the Shanghai Kid covering up like a darned hero in a play, but doing the job without any frills."

"Yes, and where were you?" demanded Mr. Wood a little bit peevishly.

"I was up in that old lilac, looking in the window there beyond the fireplace."

"I hope you enjoyed the show," muttered the dick. "It's a wonder you wouldn't have tried something to distract their attention from me a second."

"Not with the speed things were moving. I was afraid to breathe for fear of setting off the fireworks, and, to tell the truth, it wasn't something I was anxious to see. Ugh!"

The two men were standing on that spot which so

short a time earlier had been the scene of the last stand, apparently, of Blue Jean and one Shanghai.

The detective had concluded an examination of that bit of what had been the glass-covered receptacle in the wall, that now was shattered from the bullet fired by Blue Jean Billy.

"Huh!" said the officer. "Nothing more or less than a simple device for short-circuiting the lighting system—a bit of metal and the bare end of two wires that led to the switchboard in the basement, so arranged that the bullet drove the piece of steel across the exposed copper of the line."

"See that!" said the reporter. "Your Countess Romanoff had planned for just such a contingency. Everything might go well, and there would be plenty of time to complete the work at hand and retire at her leisure. And yet, there still was the one shot in a hundred that something might go wrong.

"And when that time came she wanted darkness, absolute cover for her movements of, maybe, the next ten seconds."

"She got it all right," complained Mr. Wood.

"Well, what do you deduct from that, then?" Gilson wanted to know. "It's a safe bet that she had something up her sleeve. Else for why the ample contrivance to douse the glims? Lights or no lights, unless she had some hidden avenue of escape laid out, her retreat would be cut off, and capture follow."

"That's it," affirmed the dick. "And there was always something queer about this old house. Didn't I tell you when you first mentioned this place that there had always been a bad flavor about it? They

tell all manner of queer yarns about this joint, the old-timers at headquarters."

"Well, the new-timers have got something to remember now," mused the reporter, moving slowly along the wall and running his fingers over the dado work softly.

In a minute Mr. Gilson continued:

"I am going to beat it back to Newspaper Row and give 'em a little dope in the city room; then I'm going to look up the agent who had the letting of this house."

"Bring him down here," directed Mr. Wood.

"I'll do that little thing. He ought to give us as much information as anybody."

"He ought to," muttered Mr. Wood absently.

The newspaper man went out.

Shortly thereafter, and while Mr. Wood was yet deep in his study of the perplexing mystery that surrounded the going of Billy Race and the Shanghai Kid, Mr. Wolfe of the headquarters squad came in.

"I see you're still on the job," he greeted the detective.

"I'm still here," admitted Mr. Wood a bit ruefully, "but I wouldn't want to assert how much on the job I am, not just now."

"Pretty nervy stuff, eh?" said the headquarters' man after listening to the details which the other filled in.

"Yes, that countess gag pretty nearly got across, only for the fact that by the merest chance I met Gilson of the *News* and learned from him that this old dump had suddenly been converted into a winter home for nobility, and knowing that Blue Jean was

in town I added up twice and twice and arrived at a sum total of four.

"And now things are just about where they started from, in a way. Of course, I've got men watching on the water front, and have a fast boat ready there. It's a pretty safe bet that when old Quality Bill's girl leaves town it will be down by the way of the sea."

"Yes, I guess you're right there," admitted Mr. Wolfe.

"And in the meantime," Robert Wood went on, "I'm going to stick here a bit and have one good look for that secret passage that this place has been reputed to have. Ever hear of it?"

"Yes, I have." The man from headquarters nodded his head slowly. "But it never came my way to investigate, and I don't take much stock in that kind of stuff. I have generally credited things of that nature to the guys who tamper too much with the 'white stuff.'

"Frankly, granting the vague possibility of there being a hidden cranny somewhere here, I can't believe that the girl has one chance in a thousand to get out of the city. I will notify the *Harbor II.* to hold themselves in readiness, however, and, besides that, string some plain-clothes men along the avenue.

"Also, we will have a few stools doing their little bit among friends and acquaintances. Another thing —I have it on pretty good authority that it was the Shanghai Kid himself who caused the report to go out that Quality Bill's girl was in town again. Get the point?"

"That should anything flivver a bit we would be

searching the underworld instead of Four Hundred Acre for traces of herself and the Shanghai gent."

"Just as I made it. It's few enough tricks Blue Jean Billy overlooks."

"Hey, Wolfe, what do you make of this?" Mr. Wood had been examining the hardwood dado which cased the stairs. The thumb nail of his right hand was tracing a thin crack along its course parallel to a beaded joint. A moment later he tapped lightly against the woodwork, first here, then there.

Just a moment the headquarters' man paused beside Mr. Wood; then he hurried to the door.

"Rafferty!" he addressed the officer who was on guard here. "Beat it over to Station Four and tell them to dig up a couple of chisels and a hammer and an ax, or some such combination. Shake a leg, now."

A few moments later Detective McKinnon arrived. To him the situation was explained. Scarcely ten minutes elapsed before he was hurrying into the night to further the details which had to do with capturing the elusive criminals of the underworld.

Swiftly did old John Law spread his nets along the ways of the city and along the harbor front for Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid.

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED

WITH the coming of that blanket of sheltering gloom there in the house on Burchstead Street, Blue Jean Billy was in instant action. Every second's delay had enabled her to so much better time distances and positions.

There must not be one lost fraction of a moment. Too, the woman counted partially on the bedlam that was sure to break loose with the snuffing of the lights, to cover the get-away.

Almost concurrent with the report of the pistol in her right hand her left flew to the wood paneling close behind her. With the flat palm of her hand she pushed back at a point about halfway between the partition's ending at the beginning of the stairs and its point of mitering with the side wall there beyond the bulging center of the curve.

A perfectly constructed sliding panel answered to the pressure, slipping back its full width, a distance of about sixteen inches.

Beneath her breath the girl whispered a quick command to the Shanghai Kid.

"Duck! Right here!"

The gentleman addressed instantly thrust out his hand, touched the girl's sleeve, swiftly ran his fingers along its length till they found the panel; then he shot his body through the opening sideways. With one lithe movement the girl followed him.

In that instant the sharp sound of the closing of the slide merged its note with a crash of the lunging body of the detective, as he had blundered against the dado work. True for Blue Jean, events which immediately happened beyond drowned the lesser commotion of their departure.

With a width now of but little more than twelve inches in which to maneuver, Shanghai began a short descent by means of rungs set crosswise in heavy hewn stone. Twice he got his feet snarled up, and once he missed a step and went to the bottom like a brick down a chimney.

Luckily it was not far, or what the Kid said might have been worse. A moment later Blue Jean joined him at the bottom, though less abruptly.

"Your feet do give you an awful lot of trouble, don't they, Shanghai?" queried Blue Jean dryly, and without exhibiting the slightest trace of the ordeal through which she had just passed.

"Aw-w, hoofs like mine ain't got no right comin' through them kind uh boolevards."

Neither was the gentleman of the party showing any signs of having a case, or near case, of nerves. A wild, wild world was entering a period of reconstruction close above them, but that was behind, not ahead.

Their own fortunes of life and liberty lay forward, not back. To this end Blue Jean Billy flashed the rays of a small electric pocket lamp before her. A continuance of the narrow passage was revealed between ashlar walls, extending somewhere into the murky gloom.

"Shanghai," said the girl, moving ahead slowly,

"the only trouble with this way out that I know is that there are no bridges to burn behind us. When the esteemed Mr. Wood gets through chasing his tail up there he will find that panel. It closes automatically and I set the lock. Nevertheless, sooner or later, the bulls are going to tumble.

"It's only to be expected that they will. However, we have one choice. The passage we are in now leads into an old, unusued sewer, which dips sharply farther on and goes down until it comes to what I should judge is the foot of Green Street. There it is on the level of tide water.

"At low tide there is room enough to work one's way out under those old wharfs that border the Basin above the Miller's River bridge. But right there is a drawback. You may not believe me, but it is one fine field of ooze—going out that way. And even getting out to the water it's a long swim down to the drawbridge float.

"I wanted to get a skiff planted up in there somewhere, but there was too much danger of the cops tumbling to your identity or mine. We couldn't play all the safety keys."

"I ain't much of a swimmer," said Shanghai dubiously. "An' besides that, I got a awful funny feelin' up an' down me spine in a place like this."

The man and woman were carefully picking their way along a narrow groove that allowed full head room but was very scanty as to width still. The walls were covered with mold here, and thin, trickling streams of oozing water there. The air was bad. The rays of the flash light could penetrate the thickness of the gloom but a short distance ahead.

Somewhere there was a rustle and the sound of a huge wharf rat scurrying away beyond. There was a bit of slimy pool in which the Shanghai Kid slipped and nearly fell.

The gentleman saved himself between the narrow walls, the while he swore weakly.

"Holy Judas!" he complained, "I'd mos' rather take m' chances on th' streets with th' bulls."

The girl laughed a little. "You're going to have that opportunity, too," she said.

She was playing her fingers along the wall at the left of the passage, and low near the floor.

"For many reasons the old sewer exit is not practicable to-night. The coppers may be on our heels any time, in which case our only alternative would be retreat and swim for it. And there again it's a long shot because they will be watching for us all over the harbor front. Ah, here it is."

The circle of light from the pocket lamp was playing on a square of stone.

"Try it," Blue Jean directed.

Instantly the Shanghai Kid was on his knees, crowding savagely against the stone. At first it was stubborn; then little by little it seesawed back till at length it tipped edgewise, leaving an opening about sixteen inches by twenty partially clear.

"Into it!" ordered the girl. "Head first."

The Shanghai Kid squirmed through like an eel. Blue Jean Billy followed. Hurriedly they worked the stone back into place.

The girl slumped down on a bit of earth.

"Whe-e-e-w!" she exclaimed. "Do you know, the way that dick popped in on us to-night pretty nearly

got my goat. I was a little too sure of myself; I thought everything was to the merry. It was a good thing that I stationed you behind that panel instead of following out the earlier arrangement.

"Anyway, we are safe for long enough to get our breath. The bulls will follow the passage down to the old sewer line and out, and, discovering that it has an exit in the Basin, they will give us full credit for having gone that way. They won't probably stop to look for footprints till it's too late to pick up a new trail, and if they do, it will be a long job finding that loose stone, after a lot of flatfeet have been prowling in the muck."

Again the girl was scrambling to her feet.

"Where to now fr'm here?" demanded Shanghai.

"Through an earth tunnel that you have got to navigate on your hands and knees for two blocks—and then you can rest till to-morrow night—in the old Copp's burying ground!"

"Oh-h!" bleated the Shanghai Kid. "A *buryin' groun'!* Aw-w, have a heart, lady! Le's go back an' get into th' sewer. I don't feel a little bit like goin' in an' flirtin' with no corpses—let alone livin' with 'em fer twenty-four hours. One good, big homely skeleton, an' I quit!"

"Trust me, Shanghai; I won't let them chase you."

"You pick out th' mos' gosh-awful places t' go on a get-away uh anybody I ever seen. Onct before it was Hangman's Islan', an' now it's a buryin' groun', an' Heaving knows where it's goin' t' be nex' time."

Nevertheless the Shanghai Kid, as always, carried on in spite of his habitual grumbling. It was a slow,

tedious journey, creeping along the narrow confines of the earthen passage that dipped down under the foundations of adjoining buildings, only to swing upward later to its termination in the old burying ground, but at last it was done.

It was but a few feet now, and they would rest, reconnoiter and plan for the last dash for liberty in the darkness of the night to come.

Suddenly Blue Jean, who was leading the way, paused. Also, the Shanghai Kid backed onto his haunches and cocked an ear.

Somewhere close to them there was the sound of voices. Shanghai pulled the visor of his cap up a bit from over his eyes and listened, with his mouth half open. There were strange, weird thoughts traveling through his mind with great rapidity.

Truly in a tunnel beneath a burying ground was no place to hear voices, or, if it was, it was the voices of the dead that he was hearing. Come to think of it, they must be about six feet under the sod. Holy Pat! They were on a line with the gang six feet down.

Something jangled discordantly, while the sound was strangely reproduced down the tunnel behind them with a mocking, hollow echo. It might have been the rattle of a dead man's bones, or the clatter of the latch on a rusty iron door.

The Shanghai Kid believed it was a spook shaking himself, which was a bad sign. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out; then he tried again. This time he had better luck.

"*Ur-r-r-gh!*" he wailed. "There she goes!

Oo-o-o-o, my Gadfrey! I told yeh! Hear 'em rattle their bones!"

In a flash Blue Jean's two hands were crushed over the Shanghai Kid's mouth.

"Oh, my soul!" breathed the girl. "You and your great, big trap. For the love of Heaven, what ails you?"

But her warning came too late. In that moment came a flooding flare of illumination. The tunnel was bathed in a flood of glaring brilliancy—and in the circle, square in the center of that eye of light, were the Shanghai Kid and Blue Jean Billy Race.

They were trapped.

CHAPTER XXII

A DEN OF THIEVES

A SLINKY, loathsome animal was "White-line" Bull Shattuck—a beggar, an alcohol drinker, a thief, a stool pigeon, an all-around representative of the lowest form of criminal.

White-line Bull Shattuck, too, was a cripple, both legs being off at the knees. His body was thickset, his head, it seemed, abnormally large. He reminded one more of a huge gorilla, always squatting on its haunches, leering, with eyes that were lusterless, but always cold and terrifying.

His thick jowls, powerful neck and low forehead added to the impression he gave of being more animal than man. And yet he could smile with a strange, soft light showing in his face, that was disarming. But the man was repulsive and merciless.

But for all, Bull Shattuck had a keen mind; he was cunning to a degree that is not frequent among his kind, and he was a ruler. His word was law; his associates were entirely subservient to his every command and were as low in the scale of things as himself.

It was this monster of the underworld in whose clutches Blue Jean Billy Race found herself.

White Line himself was present to direct the lashings that secured Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid.

"Clinch 'em up!" he ordered. "Set th' knots a bit tight, so's there won't be no time they'll fergit where they be. Har-r-r-h, a lady fair in evening rags, and who—— Why, do my eyes deceive me? Is that you, Shanghai? Now ain't that funny? An' I thought you was workin' with ol' Quality Bill's girl?"

Bull Shattuck's eyes suddenly shifted sharply to Blue Jean. Then without a word he stumped over to that spot where she was propped against the wall. The girl eyed him coldly and without a quiver. The man ran his pudgy forefinger insolently across her face and touched her hair.

"Made up!" he pronounced. "An', come to look the lady over closely, I see we have Billy Race with us. That's nice."

He rubbed the palms of his hands together with a soft, sinister movement.

"And now what has our high an' mighty Miss Cleanclothes been into? Um! Comin' out of Bull's secret avenue. Where 'a' yeh been?"

The whole thing had happened so swiftly that Blue Jean, whose nerves were already somewhat shaken because of the unexpected coup which Mr. Wood had pulled off and so nearly got away with, for the moment found it a little bit hard to straighten the tangle that was in her brain.

Neither had the roughness of those hands that had snatched her from the tunnel and flung her to the floor of the old tomb helped. Again, she found no room in her heart for censure of the Shanghai Kid.

She glanced about the candle-lighted den—a den of thieves of the lowest order—"super-twisters," "strong-arms," "stalls," "lush-touchers," "grubbers."

It was a motley gathering. The girl's heart sank. She recoiled from the very thought of what might come, of the repelling touch of vile hands.

Blue Jean glanced at the Shanghai Kid. His head was thrust forward on his chest; his eyes were closed. The girl sighed softly. Arrest was a thousand times preferable to this.

Bull stumped across to Shanghai and gave him a shake.

"What's your story, Kid? Ain't yeh goin' to let us in on th' graft? Ain't yeh got nothin' to say?"

The Shanghai Kid glared at last into those eyes before him—eyes, though he was in a sitting posture, that were but a little above him.

"Not one word fer you, Bull! You're too flip."

The crippled man laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, and it carried a note of warning.

From somewhere without there came a soft whistle. A moment later the heavy iron door of the tomb was swung open a bit on its rusty hinges, and a man slipped in.

He was a sallow individual called Jiggs, with tiny eyes, and possessed of a lot of quick, nervous gestures, which seemed to travel from his shoulders to his hands, then his legs and feet and back again.

Swiftly, nervously, his glance traveled around the group, then at last came to rest on Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid. He turned an inquiring eye on White Line—and suddenly remembered that he had a mission.

"Bull," he began in a shrill, squeaky falsetto tone that was peculiar to himself, and was said to have been caused by smoking too many fags in his youth,

"there's been a all-whale big stick-up at th' ol' joint on Burchstead Street, an' th' force is havin' a fit. They want ol' Quality Bill's girl an' the Shanghai Kid."

He paused suddenly as the coincidence struck him. He whirled toward the girl and Shanghai.

"Is 'at 'em?" he asked excitedly.

"Ain't you ever met Shanghai an' th' highbrow moll, Jiggs?" demanded Mr. Shattuck. "Where yeh livin' all your life?"

"Naw, I never run much in th' society they kep'," retorted Jiggs.

"Well, there they are. Make yeh acquainted."

"Where'd yeh get 'em?" asked the Jiggs gentleman excitedly. "They cleaned up a awful boodle. Did ye frisk 'em? They cleaned th' Four Hund'ed for fair an' got away clean.' "

"Not!" intercepted White Line, casting his gloating eyes at the girl. "Um! Maybe we c'n fix it fer a bit of cush fr'm th' coppers, beside making' good on th' clean-up here." His glance was significant. "Secon' nuck best owner," he quoted.

"Jiggs, you an' me will now p'rform th' ceremony uh locating th' boodle."

The two men moved forward, the snide-pitcher and the stumpy cripple.

And from the darker corners of the old tomb "Circus" McNeil, "Hootch" Rawlins and "El Carno" Fred watched, their eyes glittering, as an occasional ray of light was reflected across their faces, like the evil green balls of fire that dance from a wolf pack.

CHAPTER XXIII

MYSTERIOUS SHOTS

IT was nearly one thirty when Gilson reached Burchstead Street with the partner of the gentleman who had personally had the letting of the old house. It was little enough real information this man could give on the subject. He was too excited to be able to do little more than repeat everything that was said, and keep shaking his head, and muttering:

"She vas such a nice-e lady. Such a nice-e lady. But, *oi, oi,* it vas on a F-f-fr-r-riday!"

"You met the countess, then?" demanded Mr. Wood.

"Shoor, but it vas my partner who done all the pizness."

"Well, where is your partner?"

"I don't know, meester. He vent avay."

"By gorry," said the reporter, "I'll bet he skipped with the Countess Romanoff."

"I don't know." The real-estate man shrugged his shoulders and exhibited his palms expressively. "But, anyway, he vas sooch a rotten pisnesser. The voman made an agreement, and pay a liddle cash. She vas to meet part of the expense of r-r-remodeling, but does she do it, I don't know. To-day ve get a check, but it's too late to deposit, and the bank ain't open yet, for vy should I know if it ain't got funds. *Oi, yoi!*"

"Well," said the detective, "I guess it isn't a case of what you or your partner know or don't know, because she put it over on you, too. Furthermore, if I was you I wouldn't worry any more about whether that check is good or not. I'll tell you right now that it is not! You're good business men, oh, yes! What did she do, make eyes at you or something?"

Evidently the gentleman was of a superstitious turn.

"*Oi,* but ve did the pizness on a F-f-fr-r-riday!"

Apparently that summed it up, so far as the real-estate man was concerned.

"Anything new?" Gilson wanted to know.

"Here, look at this."

"By gorry, I thought it would be something like that!" exclaimed the man from the *Daily News,* as he beheld the shattered panel. "Where, for the love of Mike, does it go to—the cellar?"

"Cellar, nothing!" replied the irate Mr. Wood. "It goes down between the foundation wall of this house and that block next door, then shoots down into an old, unused sewer on Green Street."

"Any way out of that?"

"Huh! I should say so. The harbor at low water—that's all."

"Holy Moses! Then Blue Jean and friend Shanghai have gone?"

Mr. Wood shook his head slowly. "I don't think so," he said.

"What?"

"No. When we got down about halfway I happened to notice that there were no footprints ahead

of us in the ooze. They've doubled somewhere. It's the safest bet in the world that they haven't made the water front yet. It's too well guarded. There would be an alarm."

"M-m!" said Mr. Gilson. "I guess I'll go down and have a look myself."

"I'll go with you," said the dick. "Wolfe and a couple of men are down there now."

Then, suddenly, muffled and undefined, came the sound of a pistol shot. There was a breathless pause; then another broke the stillness.

Hurried footsteps came along the passage below.

"Wood, did you hear that?" called the police detective.

"Yes. It sounded to me as though it couldn't be at any great distance. Kind of muffled."

"It wasn't on the street, then?"

"I don't think so. Why, confound it, it almost seemed to me to be clearer when I was here near the panel than it was the first time, when I was farther away."

"Well, by thunder, there is hell loose some place!" said the headquarters man. "I don't know what to make of it." He turned to one of his men. "Kenny, hustle down into the old sewer and listen. Tell Claney to get as close as he can to the end and keep an ear open."

Already Gilson and Wood were hurrying into the street. On the corner they paused, waiting, tense.

It was, perhaps, a full minute, it seemed longer, when there came two shots in close succession. They, too, were dull and indistinct. There was no ap-

parent direction by which one might be guided as to their location.

Mr. Wood was getting nervous.

"Dammit, I don't get it at all. I've a man up there in that all-night lunch room, right beside the telephone, and the first thing that drops, some of my men or some of the headquarters bunch will notify us."

"Well, let's go up. There may be something coming in in a minute," suggested the reporter.

"You go along; I'll wait here. Keep your ears open. If there was only any sense of direction to those confounded shots."

Even as the detective spoke, the fifth shot broke the stillness of the night.

"*Some* place," said Mr. Gilson slowly, "there is a a fight—a gun fight. And that's something that was always a source of a good deal of awe to me. I always wanted to see one, and I thought for a while I was going to once to-night. And now they are running a *real* one some place—one of those cold-in-the-dark affairs where you aim for their eyeballs. Makes me shiver.

"Say, Wood, this is going to be a night before we get done. Let's walk down past the old Copp's burying ground."

The detective hesitated a minute.

"Do you know," he said, "I half have the feeling that the minute I turn my back on that blasted house Blue Jean Billy and the Shanghai Kid will come whooping out of the front door past the guy who's on guard there and go beating it down the street?"

"Sure, they are pretty apt to, what with the darned house all run over with police and honorary members of the press looming on the horizon and so forth. I suppose you want to go back and look through the place again?"

"There is little enough use of that," admitted Mr. Wood, "but it's a case of get down to tacks and discover another secret passage that I feel sure must be there."

"Yes, and while you are looking for a hole at one end, out pops your bird at the other and off she goes. And, perhaps——"

"Oh, sure!" interrupted the dick. "And, perhaps, when she does fly, it won't be by water, eh?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth," asserted Mr. Gilson.

"That may be another truth, but I don't think so. She's a daughter of the sea, is old Quality Bill's girl. She came up from it; she'll go back to it."

"So long as you think so, I suppose it must be so," gibed Gilson.

At the near corner of the old burying ground the two men paused. The reporter leaned up against the fence and cocked an eye out across the mounds and time-stained stones that marked them, showing faintly in the gloom. At the far end of the cemetery, and slightly under the curvature of the slope, was a row of sod-covered tombs.

They were in the most isolated part of the burying ground. Several trees bounded them, and added to the shade that was so thick about them.

Here and there a stone leaned over as though

weary after its many years of vigil. One had fallen.

Somewhere there was a new sound now. It was an uncanny note, and seemed to come straight from the middle of the graveyard. Mr. Gilson started; then swore briefly.

"Mother of eight!" he ejaculated. "Either I am getting a lot of dope for a story, or I am going to get fired for being drunk and hearing things in a graveyard after midnight. Wood, are you with me on this thing? Did you get that?"

"I did. And it sounded right in the middle of that cemetery. If I believed much in ghosts I'd say I heard one calling me. Perhaps there was. I'm going over in there."

"Well, that being the case," said the newspaper man promptly, "you go, I go. There wasn't ever another story like this that the *News* is going to get."

Detective Wood and Mr. Gilson were laboriously scaling the high iron fence when there came the sound of several shots in rather quick succession. They were intermingled with a wailing cry.

As before, the sounds were muffled and without leaving any sense of general direction. But one thing was certain; they were nearer, surely, than they had been back in the house on Burchstead Street.

There was something strangely perplexing about it. From the sounds of the shots here one wouldn't believe that they could be heard back there. Furthermore, it had seemed that they were more distinct

near the opening of that hidden passage than away from it.

"Those reports are underground," asserted Mr. Wood. "And seeing that they are not in the old sewer or the passage leading to it, there is a secret way somewhere that we have yet to discover."

"Granted," agreed the reporter. "But how do you explain the pistol shots? Blue Jean Billy and the Shanghai Kid wouldn't be crawling around in a subterranean passage firing for the fun of it, or, maybe for the sake of keeping us guessing."

"No," admitted Detective Wood. "And the only other conclusion is that they have run into a hidden den of crooks."

"Gad!" muttered Gilson. "Can you imagine that woman, cold as marble, holding up her end of it with a big, smoking gat in her fist, and the man, a little smirk on his lips, trying to shield old Quality Bill's girl? Wow!"

At that moment there was a shout from the direction of the original scene of the evening's entertainment. An officer came lumbering along down the street, irritably ordering back a few idle curiosity seekers, as he passed through the gate.

The reporter and the detective, having heard the call and immediately guessing its import, hurried to meet him.

"They've found it," said the man in harness, "another passage; just this minute. And there's something doing, I guess."

"Oh-h!" gasped Mr. Gilson. "This thing is beginning to make me dizzy. What stuff! What a line of dope! But"—he was scrambling back over

the rusty iron fence that kept the ghosts in the old burying ground from walking the streets—"I, though I may have a news for no—I mean nose for news—am distinctly *not* going to be the first one to poke his little old konk into this new discovery."

"Nobody's asking you to, that I know of!" fumed Mr. Wood, stumbling to the sidewalk and breaking into a run.

It was true that Detective Wolfe of the front office had at last discovered the loose stone in the narrow passage, but he was too big to navigate the diminutive opening. So, also, was Officer Rafferty.

Neither was Mr. Wood a small man, by any means, and it was tight work at best in that narrow way which Blue Jean had chosen as her line of retreat.

"Where's Gilson?" Wood demanded. "He's a little runt; he could crawl through a knot hole."

"I ain't here!" yelled the reporter, starting to back water rapidly, and skidding squarely into the arms of Officer Rafferty. "I've gone out, and besides, I've got a loving wife."

"Makes no difference," asserted Mr. Wood. "Either you're going to help us out or you're yellow. Look at the local color you're getting. Here!"

The detective thrust a big, blue automatic into the hands of Mr. Gilson.

"All right, boy. Take your time now. We're with you in spirit, and just the minute we can enlarge that blasted opening a little I'll be with you in body."

Mr. Gilson grunted, and said something that the

city editor wouldn't have allowed in the *News*. Nevertheless he accepted the gat and prepared for an active participation in the world of crime.

Though he was a jester and apparently always very solicitous of his state of health and a whole skin, Billy Gilson was by no means a coward. He had been a lusty gang scrapper in his day, and could still be aggressive when occasion called.

He proved it now by squirming through that opening in the ashlar wall through which Blue Jean Billy Race and the Shanghai Kid had gone to their grim awakening in the den of thieves so short a time before.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITH TIED HANDS

NOTHING could have been more relentless in its persecution of his conscience than the thought that he, the Shanghai Kid, in a freakish moment when his nerves went wrong, had betrayed the presence of himself and Blue Jean to a band of crooks whom they had unexpectedly found blocking their retreat.

The Shanghai Kid realized full well that it was through no fault of the girl's that one of her emergency exits was blocked by White-line Bull Shattuck and his scum of the streets. Things had broken a little badly for her at the last moment when the ever-pressing pursuit of the detective had swung so close and so unexpectedly.

She had had no time to review in person her lanes of withdrawal—those long-existing underground traffic highways for criminals of long ago, of the days when Quality Bill was at the height of his career.

Blue Jean had once looked over the passage that led to the unused sewer, but that was all there had been time for. From her position as a countess it was not at all appropriate that she alternate between a woodchuck and a peeress at any moment that it might occur to her to reconnoiter the aisles of possible get-away channels.

But there would easily have been some way out, if only it hadn't been for that hollow rattle and Shanghai's own superstitious terror. These and other long trains of thought were coursing through the brain of the Shanghai Kid as he sat hunched on the earth floor of the old tomb.

Strong and fresh in his mind, however, were those thoughts that had to do with saving the girl from the outrage of even the touch of the slimy, crippled White Line.

The loot taken from the guests who were present at the house on Burchstead Street was in a chamois bag in a huge pocket of Blue Jean Billy's petticoat, where it was absolutely safe, and at the same time gave her full freedom of movement.

Also, strapped in a holster beneath the evening gown which she wore, was her automatic. The Shanghai Kid's gun was still in its place beneath his shirt and under his left armpit.

In the suddenness of the coming of that blinding flood of light that had circled them, they had made no attempt to defend themselves. Almost without a struggle they had been dragged forth and bound. Their captors had seemed more content to gloat over their plight than they had to search the victims and relieve them of their weapons and the rich reward that the chamois bag contained.

It was like White Line to leer and gloat, to torment as a cat plays with a mouse. The man and woman were securely tied. Why not let them rest for a time till his evil mind could conjure devices to torment them with? White-line Bull Shattuck would sting and bite them in the manner

he found the most pleasing, till he had worked himself into a savage rage that would lead him to ranges of cruelty unimaginable.

Or, again, he might find it to his pleasure merely to taunt them with their loss of treasure, and the fact that they were to be turned, when he was done, into the hands of the police.

As it was the spirit of the girl never to say die, so, too, there was in the soul of the Shanghai Kid a stern, grim determination never to haul down his colors. From that first moment after he had been bound and hurled into a corner of the tomb he had been fighting. It was up to him. He had got Blue Jean Billy into the fire; he must get her out.

Sitting with his knees hunched before him and his hands bound behind his back, the Shanghai Kid maintained a position with his chin buried on his chest. One watching him closely in the uncertain light of the place might have observed that occasionally there seemed to be a spasmodic twitching of Shanghai's body. It might have been that he was tugging mechanically at the cords that held him, or that the cramped position of his body caused him to seek a position that alleviated the terrible sensation of knotted muscles.

Though once or twice his peculiar movements were observed by the watchful White-line gentleman, the latter gave little thought other than that his nibs was having a hard time to accustom his person to being trussed up in that workmanlike manner. In fact Bull was at length led to remark on the performance.

"Go awn," he sneered, "an' make yehself right to home. Twitch till yeh are blue, an' when ye are all done, I'll maybe have Hootch put a new kind of hitch onto yeh. Yah!"

He turned to Blue Jean, playing a flash light square in her eyes.

"You ain't so nervous as your frien', eh?" he asked. "But prob'ly ye are goin' to be before White Line gets done."

The stump of a thing that was once a man smirked grotesquely, showing his yellow, uneven teeth. He went on:

"But I'll be fair with yer. Shure! Won't I, Jiggs? Yah!"

"Guess yeh will, a'right," muttered the snide-pitcher nervously. "Fair enough."

"Hear that? Hear what 'e says? You're goin' to be treated fine—if yer behave yerself."

"I hear you," said Blue Jean evenly.

"An' ye ain't makin' no offer? Don't I hear ye say a price? Ye'd offer th' bulls some dough—why don't ye try ol' Bull? Take pity on a po-o-or cripple."

White Line was moving nearer now. He was still rubbing his hands together softly.

"How much?"

"Not a red, White Line." The girl's tones were as clear and as cold as ice. "You have nothing to sell that I would buy. I'll make no offer to you, for you're not to be trusted. You're a rat! Scum! Make *you* an offer!"

The girl paused a moment, biting her lip savagely.

"Nothing doing!"

White-line Shattuck stood on his stumps of legs and gazed down at the wild young thing that had fallen into his clutches. Evil was in his sinister eyes, but still his voice was not raised beyond its ordinary scratchy harshness.

"Ye thought I'd take it all anyhow, did ye?"

"I'd think anything of you!"

"Miss-s Race! A la-a-dy—crook! Yah-h-h!"

The cripple's voice rose to a hoarse half screech. His fingers brushed down across the girl's face. She shrank back and turned her head, while still the cold defiance of her was shown in the grim courage that blazed in her eyes.

Like slinking curs that watch the king beast from a safe distance as he tortures and taunts his victims, the four gutter rats who accepted White Line as their master watched with eyes that reflected their anticipation of the probable spoils that were waiting the hand of the man leering there.

So much was the brutal crook their master that never for an instant did there enter their cramped brains the thought of turning to Blue Jean's assistance, even with the realization in their hearts of the fact that their share would be only what Bull Shattuck chose to give them.

In every instant that was creeping by the Shanghai Kid was praying for time. And prayer was a thing that had seldom entered into this man's life to any noticeable extent. It had never been in the atmosphere of his home life before the world took him; neither had the world taught him its power. And yet, in these terrible moments when the woman in whom he had found so much to admire and re-

spect, was close to the indignity of a search by a vile human wreck, the Shanghai Kid found that his lips turned to murmur an appeal for help from a Being that he usually had only referred to with oaths.

"Gawd help meh!" he breathed. "If it's because I'm a crook, an' yeh won't lis'en t' what I asts, help meh because it's a fine lady I want t' help."

For many minutes the chin of the Shanghai Kid had been working at a strap that was beneath his shirt—a strap that traced its course from a point beneath his left armpit up around his right shoulder. It was one of two straps that held the holster which contained his gat in place. A second strap passed around his chest. The former held the pistol from slipping lower; the latter from working sideways.

From right to left the Shanghai Kid's chin was working across his shirt, always bearing against the buckle of that top strap, always worrying it down toward his armpit. And each fraction of an inch that he worked the end of this strap back under its patent buckle there on his chest freed just so much more the top of the holster of his automatic. Also, every contortion, every apparently nervous gesture of his body helped tip that holster backward. It was a terribly long and tedious job. Every minute that passed dragged to an hour's duration in the nerve-racked brain of Shanghai. And yet, slowly—oh, so terribly slowly—he was working into position.

Though his wrists were lashed together behind his back, there was play enough for him to pick

at his shirt, working it up a bit at a time, till his ever-searching fingers were able to feel under it and touch the comforting leather of that case which held the pistol.

Then came the operation of trying to shake the automatic loose in the holster that it might slide out into that hungry hand. Shanghai slipped a little lower on the dirt of the floor, inched a bit away from the wall and tipped his body almost into a reclining position.

The movement distracted White Line for a minute, and he turned a snarling face at the Shanghai Kid. Then suddenly he waddled to the prostrate figure and savagely set one leather-encased stump on the face of the man on the floor.

"Lay still, ye twitchin' welcher. I'll walk all over yer mug in a minut'."

He added an ugly kick to the performance; then turned back toward the girl. Her eyes were toward the Shanghai Kid. She smiled bravely and gave him a glance of pity; and then suddenly there was something in the attitude of the other that caught her attention. She couldn't have said what it was, but instantly it put her on her guard.

Shanghai found no resentment in his heart for the brutality of Bull Shattuck; rather, he was pleased to look upon the action as an answer to his prayers, for when a gentleman gets kicked in the face he has ample excuse to squirm.

And this was exactly what the Shanghai Kid did, and not without effect.

From its snug repository in its holster, a black

automatic slipped softly out and down into the waiting palm of the Shanghai Kid.

Jiggs, the snide pitcher, was standing a bit back of White Line, watching with gleeful anticipation. He knew better than to offer his services when it came to frisking the girl. That was Bull's job, and he was very capable of attending to it alone. The snide pitcher had no eyes for the Shanghai Kid, none whatsoever.

The latter gentleman found that by canting himself partly on his right side he could get a very fair bead on one Jiggs, so called. It was not that he had anything special against the snide pitcher that Shanghai chose him for the first martyr, but for the simple fact that White Line was entirely out of range at this moment.

Again, for a fleeting fraction of a second, the eyes of Blue Jean swept the face of Shanghai, and in that passing gaze she caught a movement of the other's lips. Battered though they were from the weight of the cripple's stump, there was a movement of them that would suggest puckering up preparatory to whistling.

Shanghai was telling her something. What was it? For a moment she racked her brain; then it came to her. He was blowing. Blowing what?

Her eyes swiftly ranged the tomb—and rested on the candle that flickered on a box scarcely a yard from her feet. The Shanghai Kid wanted her to put that out. But when? Why?

It was in that instant that the first shot that the men at the other end of the passage had heard

rang out. Also, it was the shot that sent the snide pitcher crumbling to the floor.

It was almost with the first shattering crash of the automatic in the hand of the Shanghai Kid that Blue Jean jerked herself near enough to the box to kick it savagely with her feet.

With the coming of the shroud of gloom the Kid immediately shifted his position as quietly and as much as possible for the room he had. Then he took a chance as to the general direction White Line might be in and squeezed the automatic again.

The Shanghai Kid was suddenly savage with the joy of being able to defend Blue Jean. True, firing behind one's back with arms tied was not at all conducive to accurate shooting, but at the same time it answered the purpose very well under the circumstances.

For a long minute after the din of the explosions in the narrow confines of the place had died away, there was a silence that was broken only by heavy breathing here and there. Then, somewhere in the gloom beyond, a rod barked twice. The breath of two whining bits of lead whipped the cheek of the Shanghai Kid, but that was all.

Almost without breathing Shanghai waited now. He was out of position to reply in the direction of the flashes that had spat their ugly yellow tongues at him. He would have to sit up a little more and turn a bit, and then—well, if he wasn't out of luck entirely, he might get one home where it would do the most good.

He was tense with nervous apprehension. Any second Bull Shattuck might turn loose on him the

glare of that flash light. Still, the last Shanghai remembered of having seen it, it was on the box with the candle. Such being the case there was no telling where it was now. Once more there came a shot from somewhere in the blackness.

The Shanghai Kid set his lips grimly. "Wait," he muttered deep down within himself. "Jest wait a bit an' I'll rake th' whole bloomin' wall."

The time that passed then seemed interminably long. Neither side was disposed to take any more chances for a little while.

And then, from a spot right before him, there came the soft creak of leather. Instantly Shanghai recognized it. It was the great leather stumps on White-line Bull Shattuck.

For a moment Shanghai balanced himself as best he could as he got into position; then squeezed the gat savagely. Four times it yelped its brief battle song. There was a weird, choked cry and something fell.

Instantly from a far corner came the whining voice of Hootch Rawlins.

"Call it off! Don't shoot!"

The Shanghai Kid did not answer; neither did he fire. He'd give 'em a chance to come again. They'd started it. He'd give 'em a fight. It was a dirty deal for crooks to pull on some of their own kind. They'd played it low; the Kid guessed they'd got it back.

Mentally he remembered telling himself that if his hand was free and it wasn't for Blue Jean, he'd *never* call it off.

At last Shanghai spoke. "Are yeh got enuf?"

"Aw-w, we ain't no gun fighters," whined a voice. "We didn't want none of it."

"Make a light, feller," was the next command; "and be careful what yeh do. I got cat eyes."

In a moment a match flickered. From the dirt of the floor Circus McNeil took the candle and lighted it. He picked up the box and returned it to its place.

"A'right. Unhitch th' lady."

"Oh, Shanghai, how'd you do it?"

There was a choking note in the voice of Blue Jean Billy that was the nearest thing to emotion that the Shanghai Kid ever remembered having witnessed in the girl. Slowly she stumbled to her feet, stretched herself, and glanced about the place. A moment later she had loosened the knots that bound the Shanghai Kid. Together they took account of stock.

Neither White-line Bull Shattuck nor Jiggs the snide pitcher had received their last reward, much as they deserved it. Both, however, were badly hit and entirely off the lists of good fighting men. It was entirely unnecessary to fasten either to be sure that they would remain where they were for a time.

Blue Jean, as cool, as calculating as ever, was losing no time in preparing for a resumption of their flight. Quickly she sized up the three remaining examples of neglect, and ordered El Carno Fred to get out of his rags. She insisted on his shirt and hat.

From Hootch Rawlins, Shanghai borrowed a hat also and a coat. The gentleman were then tied up.

Blue Jean snuffed the candle and immediately proceeded to get out of the Countess Romanoff's evening dress and into garments contributed by El Carno Frederick. Later she offered the gentleman her gown, which Shanghai spread over the lush-toucher.

"Now," said the girl, "we'll try again for the lanes of life where the gray birds call."

Softly they swung open the aged iron door and stepped quietly into the night outside.

El Carno's clothes were a very fair fit. His cap, with the girl's brown hair crowded close under its sheltering crown, provided for her a most creditable disguise. Too, the Shanghai Kid had pulled close over his eyes the huge-visored gray cap of Hootch's, while the coat was buttoned tight up under his chin.

Blue Jean took a long breath of clean, fresh air and exhaled it slowly.

"Oh-h," she exclaimed, "it's good, good!"

"Yea-ah," muttered the Shanghai Kid. "An' now le's be gettin' out uh here before another one uh them ghosts starts rattling dead men's bones."

CHAPTER XXV

GILSON'S DISCOVERY

THE candle was not burning in the old tomb when a somewhat begrimed gentleman by the name of Billy Gilson poked his head through an opening in the wall, which was the end of the passage from the house on Burchstead Street.

Warily he was feeling his way along, fearing that to use the flash would betray him. His head came in contact with a soft blanket of some kind. Mr. Gilson pulled it gently aside.

The air beyond was warm. There was the pungent odor of powder. The reporter suddenly found himself possessed of a desire to back up.

He heard breathing. A man groaned and was promptly advised to keep his troubles to himself.

Mr. Gilson squatted back on his heels weakly. He glanced into the gloom behind him.

"Now, where is that blank, blank bull?" he thought.

He wished he had a drink, so that he would have a little more courage in his system. He felt funny. At length, however, with his "smoking iron" in one hand and the flash lamp in the other, Mr. Gilson pushed the button.

The scene that met his eyes was something to make even a hardened old newspaper man catch his breath, and that was about all he did before he dropped to the floor, asked a few hurried questions,

and went out by the way so recently taken by the Shanghai Kid and Blue Jean Billy.

After making a hasty survey of the burying ground and the street, Mr. Gilson set out to acquaint the coppers with a few new developments in the case. He charged madly into the recent scenes of joy and mirth, yelling something about gangway and Hades let loose.

Several newsgatherers tried to confiscate him, but Brother Gilson was seeing red and talking blue.

"Bull Shattuck and some other gaff had a hallelujah of a Waterloo!" cried the reporter. "Looks like the woman and the Shanghai Kid stumbled on 'em unexpectedly and handed it to the bunch good and proper. That's what the shooting was—down in one of those old tombs in the Copp's burying ground. That's where the hole I went into comes out.

"Shattuck and another rummy were shot, and three other mugs are tied in a bundle. My soul! They told me Blue Jean and Shanghai hadn't been gone three minutes.

"No, I didn't see *anything* that looked like 'em. I couldn't see anything anyway, after that setting was flashed on me."

Mr. Wood even failed to register surprise. When he came forth from the broken panel he was traveling just exactly as fast as Halley's comet in the year of the Big Wind. There was only one place on earth he wanted to be—and that was at the Miller's River draw. He headed in that direction at once.

No one questioned the right of a couple of rather

seedy-looking individuals to their place on the streets in the hours bordering on two o'clock. Perhaps this was because the pair studiously avoided contact with anything in the line of harness bulls or roundsmen.

Swiftly, and yet without violating any of the rules of walking events, they chose the most direct route to the old Flint Street gas-house wharf. They did not, in taking this route, pass over the bridge that was carefully guarded by members of the International Detective Agency. Neither did it place them in a position at any time where they might be observed by dickie birds along the avenue. Few people indeed traversed those ways that bounded the old gas house in the hours between midnight and early morning.

To the right of the gas house was a large open space closed on two sides by a high board fence, and decorated by huge piles of scrap iron. A low iron fence separated the junk yard from the great round tanks of the gas plant, while on the third boundary was a dilapidated wharf. Here was one side of the channel, of which the float at the Miller's River draw was the center.

Entering a narrow alley between the gas house and a shed the two prowlers of the night slipped over the iron fence, zigzagged in and out between great piles of scrapped materials, and in hardly any time at all were picking their way gingerly across the wharf.

A ladder nailed up along the piling afforded them means of descending to a float at the bottom. It was about thirty feet in length by fifteen in width, riding

high in the water, to an extent that would suggest boxes or pontoons supporting its superstructure.

Across the channel, at the float by the central span of the bridge, the rakish gray boat still moved quietly on the tide. Everything else was still. There were no signs of life about either the draw or the bridge above. One yellow light flickered from a window in the draw-tender's quarters. That was all.

And then, suddenly, there were shouts and running men down along the bridge.

For just a moment Blue Jean Billy Race watched them.

"I don't know," she said, "how they got the trail so quickly. Either we are playing it a bit slow, or Robert Wood is becoming inhumanly adept at picking up the scent. We have got to step fast, Shanghai, or they will have us boxed yet."

"Jest as I suspected," muttered the Shanghai Kid, hurriedly fitting a key to a lock which made fast a trap in the center of the float. "Jest as I suspected."

CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE WHARF

SOMEWHERE in his mad flight Robert Wood had corralled an old nighthawk and his dejected nag. He appropriated both, then climbed up beside the driver to encourage that gentleman.

Billings and a plain-clothes man came hurrying to meet them as they charged onto the bridge.

"That gray boat!" yelled Mr. Wood. "Watch it! Watch it! Don't let anything move. Billings, you take this hack and ride like blazes to Battery Wharf and shake daylights out of the engineer on that speed boat I have there.

"Tell him to come up to Miller's River draw. Let Murray come with him, and you come back along the water front, and look sharp. Blue Jean Billy has got by us and there's only one thing for us to do, and that is to head her off before she gets a start on us on water."

"All right, Mr. Wood."

A moment later and again the old hack was crashing off in the direction of the avenue.

Mr. Wood whirled and rushed to the center of the draw span and fairly flung himself down the narrow hole through which projected the iron ladder that would take him to the pier below. The headquarters dick followed him swiftly.

"And Wolfe has notified the *Harbor II.*," Mr. Wood was saying, as he scrambled down the iron

rungs. "She'll be along any minute, and can comb the docks with her searchlight. Right now you and I will take possession of the gray craft."

Two highly indignant gentlemen of Italian extraction greeted their coming with a combination of bad English and good Italian, that was plainly enough straightforward profanity in either language.

"Well-l-yo-o-o! What's a da mat? What's a da mat?"

Mr. Wood struck a light and flashed his badge.

"Cheese-s-s a da cop! We done nothing! You see! We getta da gin-n-nay for da law! He's fix!"

At the end of a brief conversation Mr. Wood was convinced that, after all, he was barking up the wrong tree.

"Lots a dar boats lak thees," one of the dusky gentlemen explained.

Then all in a flash there came to the brain of the detective the remembrance that this boat had been towing what appeared to be an old float that afternoon he had watched it come up the harbor.

"What was that thing I saw you towing in here? Har-r-h?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Aw-w, she joost somet'ing Black Joe da Poortagee say take heem up by da gas house. Ten dol? Shoor. Da's all!"

"And where does this Black Joe hang out? What?"

"She's Big Broose. Way-y outside. He's a da fisherman."

"My-y gad!" exploded the International man, springing from the gray boat to the float and up the stairs to the pier. "Where was my thinking cap? Why, in Heaven's name, didn't I look over

that old raft before? But anyway, it can't act as more than a hiding place till such time as they can duck out some time a little later on. I think those blasted wops are putting something over on us yet."

Somewhere down along the black wharves there was a purring note. Mr. Wood smiled, then grunted.

"Huh! Here she comes!"

"What's that?" asked the headquarters man.

"The *Comet,* by name," explained Mr. Wood. "And, believe me, she is some stepper. Wow, man! As fast as anything around here."

Then, too, came scooting the fast *Harbor II.,* a nineteen miler in her own right, while from the bridge came hurrying Mr. Wolfe, a couple of harness bulls, two or three plain-clothes men, Mr. Gilson, and brothers of the press. The group joined Mr. Wood.

The latter gentleman explained that there was nothing doing so far in connection with the gray boat that he had had under surveillance, or with Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid.

Mr. Gilson breathed deeply and sighed.

"Gadfrey Dinah!" he protested. "Ain't I going to get any climax for this story that I've been through so much to get? Holy Moses! Didn't even get a chance to say good night to the lady. Bar-r-h!"

The *Comet,* with Mr. Murray, arrived with a flourish.

"Tie up at the float down there," ordered Mr. Wood.

The *Harbor II.* was nosing along easily in midstream. Her searchlight was alternating on both

shores—darting, lingering, sweeping here, there, above, below, flinging its pentrating eye of light on every dark and sinister nook and cranny.

And then, like a blast of light from the blue heavens, the spotlight of the police boat had fastened on that old, weather-stained float which was tied at the foot of the gas-house wharf. A man was standing on it, casting off a line. It was the Shanghai Kid.

Instantly pandemonium broke.

"Quick!" cried out Detective Wood. "There they are!"

Gilson was dancing on the edge of the pier. There was the rest of his story less than three hundred yards away across the channel.

A bell jangled sharply in the engine room of the *Harbor II.* The boat lurched ahead at full speed.

At that moment a roar broke from the old raft. Blue smoke fringed it. The Shanghai Kid dropped from sight through an open trap. Only the top of his head was showing now.

And then, weirdly enough, the battered, one-time float opened slowly in a V-shape, while from the outer end a sleek, shining nose poked its way.

Blue Jean's foot left the pedal of the self-starter. Cool fingers coaxed the spark and teased the throttle —open a bit, closed, open again. The engine was cold, but it picked up its gas with a certain sureness that sent the blood tingling through the veins of the clear-eyed girl at the wheel.

Oh, what a glorious sensation! Her pet, *Nix's Mate,* was living up to all the good that had been

said of it. Almost unconsciously she patted the sleek and polished woodwork.

"If the blessed bulls would only hold their fire for just a minute, Shanghai," she murmured, "just a minute!"

The Shanghai Kid, however, was saying nothing. He was just hanging on. Something seemed on the point of tearing itself out from under him. Holy cats! This was no time to let go. He set his fingers tighter.

The boat lifted forward a bit, and lunged. There was a reverberating roar from the exhaust—and *Nix's Mate* was on its way to Raggedy Ann, far out on the edge of the sea.

A scattering volley of shots greeted her going, but none took effect.

Blindly the engineer on the *Comet* was tearing loose a line, while Robert Wood eyed him a bit disdainfully through the gloom.

"Never mind!" barked the officer. "Stay where you are. It's all off. We've got nothing that can *go* like that hydroplane. We're beaten again—beaten on the last card of the play. Take off your hats, gents."

Mr. Gilson was muttering to himself:

"Good stuff! Good stuff!"

And with the swell of the ocean again beneath the *Nix's Mate* reeling off the miles, one every minute and a quarter, Blue Jean Billy Race and the Shanghai Kid flashed past the last point of danger in their going, while the latter just set his teeth firmly and muttered to himself:

"Gad 'elp us!"

Again Blue Jean was going home to Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE HAUNT

IN the days when Blue Jean Billy Race came reeling back to Raggedy Ann through the dizzy seas from her daring thrusts at the glittering wealth of Four Hundred Acre, the naked cliffs were free from molestation by other than Blue Jean herself and the Shanghai Kid.

Even to the more venturesome who roamed that way in small boats, whatever curiosity they may have felt in regard to that forbidding island, none cared to brave the rumbling surf that surged and fell away from the sea-sculptured rock walls in a dazzling smother of spume.

In selecting her hiding place, Blue Jean had chosen well. Her boats were hidden from prying eyes by a high-arched and protecting wall of rock, which, besides acting as a screen, served in the capacity of a natural breakwater.

No precaution existed that Blue Jean had overlooked, it seemed; no path behind her in the watery wastes for the officers of the law to find and follow. Miles away to the northward she had always managed to shake off the last of the more persistent of her pursuers.

Wide to either side of Raggedy Ann all police trails had led. It was the belief that the woman outlaw and the faithful Shanghai Kid had for a rendezvous some isolated spot on the mainland.

Neither members of the front-office detective staff, nor Robert Wood, of the International Agency, who, on behalf of certain private interests, was also attempting to discover the secret retreat, found any scent to follow after the lighthouse keeper on Ribbon Reef had reported a fast boat headed seaward. This on the night that the *Nix's Mate* had made her first appearance.

Mr. Robert Wood and the police had both centered their glasses on Raggedy Ann from a distance, but the bleak, gray cliffs, fringed in their smother of white and boiling surf, had offered no encouragement as concerned a closer inspection.

Certainly—and their reasoning was logical—there was far more opportunity for concealment along the miles of lonely and little-frequented shores than out in the midst of a bleak waste of waters of problematical moods, there beyond the outer breakers. And it was along the rugged coast line and the south that the man hunters—the woman hunters now—sought Blue Jean Billy Race.

Finally there came a night when a black and silent boat slipped slowly down past Kettle Bottom Rock and let go her hook in deep water off the Roaring Bulls. With scarcely a sound to betray her presence, the strange craft paid out her anchor line and made fast.

The vessel carried no lights, and her ports were heavily shrouded. Several figures moved about the deck, but no word was uttered. Everything bespoke the strictest caution.

The sky was black and overcast; the sea was smooth; only a low, lazy ground swell, a slow heave

that rose and fell like the bosom of a great giant breathing, was on the waters. The bell off Vapor Rock clanged with indifferent monotony, almost, it seemed in accompaniment to the punctual surge of the sea against the bleak and sinister ledges of the Fiddlers and Raggedy Ann.

For an hour after coming to anchor the strange visitor to this unfrequented and treacherous stretch of tidal waters gave forth no sign of life aboard.

One o'clock came. The sea was on the ebb. The Roaring Bulls were just leering above the surface of the water. Crests of white were beginning to comb across the famous Devil's Back. A new moon, faint and lusterless in the murky heavens, showed in the western sky. A whistling buoy somewhere in the inky blackness moaned at intervals with the awesome uncertainty of a ghost in a sepulcher. On the distant horizon to the eastward, pin points of lights from a steamer were discernible.

A hatch scraped aboard the mysterious stranger, and a head appeared in a companionway; soon it was joined by a second. A dull, yellow patch of light was reflected upward from the cabin below, and touched the faces above.

"Douse that glim, yeh f-fool!" snarled the owner of one of the faces. His voice was raucous, authoritative, and directed at some person below.

Instantly the mellow glow from the unseen source of light faded on the screen of the night. There was a moment's silence; then a low conversation began.

"Well, everything's lookin' up so far," said one.

"You've said it," returned the other. "The only wonder to me is that the bulls never did wise up."

"No wonder about it," came from the first speaker, "only for Yennie, the Ape, tumbling to what that wop said about Portugee Joe and the Brewsters, and then following up the tip, we wouldn't been any wiser than them smart dicks that has been butting their brains out and not making any drops."

For a moment there was silence. Both men were peering into the night about them, studying intently the black outlines of Raggedy Ann, some three quarters of a mile away.

"Wild and woolly," muttered one.

"I'll say so," said his companion reflectively. Then: "What does the weather look like to you?"

"Huh? Fair enough. Was you thinking of a storm?"

"You hear me, when she blows I want to be a long way from these waters. I heard that wop up to Ginny Village say that from the Graves Light way in past Ribbon Reef this place was a graveyard in its own right."

"It's a wonder how old Quality Bill's girl hangs on here so long," mused the gentleman who was known as "Jackstraw Billy," alias Bill Hyle. "She must have another job under her hat."

"Maybe she has, and then again maybe she hasn't," said the other, suddenly crowding the hatch back to its full extent and clambering out into the cockpit, "which is nothing in my life. There are a whole lot more interesting things that I have my mind on right now than wondering what this high-class crook is planning for her next movie stunt. Get

ready. We're going to make a stab at this thing right now."

"Mash Market Jake," otherwise known as Engle J. Gottlieb, was a celebrity of the underworld who had been educated in nearly every branch of the criminal profession. He was a gentleman who was bothered very little by his conscience, and if there is anything to the saying concerning honor among thieves, certainly Engle J. was a glaring exception.

For a long minute Mash Market Jake hung over the rail and studied the outline of Raggedy Ann again, quite as though he expected to solve the mystery of the place, or, rather, hoped to fathom the secret of the riches that must surely be hidden there behind that mask of rock.

With a nervous, impatient movement, he turned to address other of his associates who were conversing in low tones below decks.

"All right, Yennie, come on; you and Sam."

Already the personage referred to as Jackstraw Billy was pulling the dory, that had been towed behind, alongside. A gunwale caught beneath a fender on the larger boat and an oar slatted noisily across a seat.

Jake swore half aloud as he started nervously; then beneath his breath he cursed the careless Bill Hyle roundly.

"Hey, what do you want to do, wake the dead in the deep? You keep on blundering around and we'll have somebody sitting up there on one of those cliffs with a gat in both fists. Sound travels on the water, for gosh sake."

He turned to the dark figures behind him. His

voice was low and tense. He addressed the gentleman previously spoken of as Yennie, the Ape, and one "Bottle Sam," or Charles H. Dollard.

"On the job, you two able seamen. Bill, you get up in the bow and be ready to take care of her when she goes ashore; I'll stay in the stern. Go ahead now and see if you can crab the thing by falling over something. Got those oarlocks wrapped up?"

Once overside, there was a moment's hesitation before shoving off. Jake was carefully summing up all moves. He glanced back into the cockpit. A fifth figure had appeared there in the personage of Edward Sondheim, "One-eyed Slade." It was a nom de plume that was very appropriate because of the fact that an optic had disappeared during a slight altercation among some friends on the old Bowery in the days of long ago.

"One Eye," cautioned Jake in parting, his voice a hoarse whisper, "you keep that one good peeper of yours wide open, and when I give you the signal with this flash, you show a light in the rigging, or else we'll never get back to the tub in this blackness."

"Yea-ah, yea-ah," croaked the rather elderly Mr. Sondheim impatiently; "an' when yeh get out there a ways, row back an' tell it to me again."

As silently as a shadow creeping, the dory moved away from the mother ship. Yennie, the Ape, and Sam were expert in the art of dipping and raising a pair of oars without disturbance of the water. No word was spoken. The man in the bow and the man in the stern crouched low and strained their eyes toward that island where their hopes

lay for a rich haul—the loot that Blue Jean Billy Race had brought back to the sea from the wealth of Four Hundred Acre and the scions of its aristocratic social universe.

As the boat moved nearer, there appeared on a low-lying reef which reached out into the sea from the western fringe of Raggedy Ann the broken skeleton of a ship, its massive ribs projecting upward from the shattered remains of a sturdy keel. Like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster, the hulk slouched drunkenly across the jagged crest of the short range of black rocks.

Bill Hyle studied it long and earnestly; then, almost reluctantly, he allowed his eyes to wander to the main part of Raggedy Ann. Too, Mr. Engle J. Gottlieb found about that skeleton of a ship here on this haunting island of the sea something that caused him to meditate profoundly anent the possibilities of disaster.

Once he even fancied he could distinguish the dim outline of a man crouched beside one of those sea-scoured frames. A moment later, however, a wave higher than its mates, racing in from seaward, enveloped the black shape and obscured it in a crash of white. But when the giant comber was gone, the undefined form was there still.

Again, and on a high-flung crest of stone, the searching eyes of Mash Market Jake paused and seriously studied a dim and uncertain thing that had once seemed to be moving stealthily along the edge of the cliff. That it was but a shadow, deeper and darker than others among the nooks and crannies of Raggedy Ann, did not exactly allay the sinis-

ter something that was playing havoc with the nervous system of the usually self-possessed Jacob.

Apparently this state of uneasiness which Mr. Gottlieb and Mr. Hyle both were silently striving to throw off was contagious. Yennie, the Ape, repeatedly flung an eye over his shoulder in swift and questioning review of that gloomy mass of rock now so short a distance away. Bottle Sam so far forgot himself, in his efforts to solve the riddle of what was waiting there behind his straining back, that he lost track of the stroke and fouled Yennie's right oar.

The sudden rattle of blade against blade was startling.

"Maude Judas!" whispered Bill Hyle in a hoarse warning. "Watch your step!"

"Listen!" breathed the suddenly distraught Engle J. in the stern, crouching forward and clutching to stay the hands at the nearer oars.

Both men stopped rowing, while each stared fixedly at the black bulk that loomed close off their bow. Somewhere there in the night before them sounded the fragmentary part of a vague call. The crash of a watery mound against the jagged abutments drowned all but the very first of a haunting cry.

Bill Hyle found himself breathing hard, while every muscle in his body was rigid. He turned his head from side to side, listening intently.

"Row around the island," ordered Jake in an excited whisper. "Keep as close as you can in the shadows, but for the love of your necks, don't get caught in the breakers."

Even as the oars dipped, there came again the

cry. This time it was louder, and contained an almost haunting note. It reached the ears of the four men in the dory as a slow-mounting wail that trailed away in a weird half shriek, half moan. The gentlemen at the oars doubled their efforts and sent the craft darting toward that tiny cove to the northwest of the island.

Jake and Bill Hyle slipped their automatics free and turned a perplexed stare toward that high-mounted pinnacle of rock whence the sound had seemed to come. Here was something that they had strictly not made any allowance for—a "haunt" on Raggedy Ann. Certainly the fearsome note was far from human.

An instant later, however, and the thought had flashed into the mind of Mr. Gottlieb that perhaps the solitude of the place had been too much for either the Shanghai Kid or Blue Jean, and one or the other of them had gone dippy. Such a thing was not impossible. Far from it. The squat leader of the expedition found sudden relief in this self-determined explanation; for if his surmise were correct, the task at hand should prove easier, if anything.

A little later the same thought came to the slower thinking Bill Hyle, but, unlike the man in the stern, he found no comforting reassurance in the contemplation of facing the furies of a crazed human being out here on this black and gruesome spot in the midst of the sea.

The two gentlemen who were handling the oars had never developed the ability to do other than as they were told. Their stolid brains offered no other

explanation for the strange wailing cry than just plain ghosts. Of their own accord they would have fled, but of two evils the forces who were directing this affair afforded the more serious consideration. They had always entertained the utmost respect for haunts and the like, but they were in absolute fear of the merciless personage known as Mash Market Jake and his lieutenant, Bill Hyle.

In the present trying moments they gave their attention, as undivided as possible, to keeping the boat clear of the breakers that piled up there against the reef on which rested that rambling wreck of long ago.

A third time the cry rang through the night air before the four men and the dory had reached the waters to westward of Raggedy Ann, where the smoother, lazing roll eased their approach to that opening between the kelp-fringed edges which led to the strange little cove where the boats of Blue Jean Billy tugged sluggishly at their mooring lines.

This time the sound seemed to fling itself from the very center of the rearing hulk of this ship that had been. The crash of the surf drowned again the last of the despairing shriek. The thing seemed almost like a frantic unknown, flinging some strange warning across the distances.

Engle J. Gottlieb swore half aloud, while Bill Hyle cursed the nameless thing with a sudden savage fury. They nervously cuddled the butts of their big automatics in moist palms, while they set themselves to spring clear of the boat the minute the long, curved stem of the dory shot up onto the tiny, pebbly shore—the one possible landing spot among the weed-wreathed facades of Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LIGHT THAT FAILED

BLUE JEAN BILLY RACE awoke with a start. And yet as quickly as wakefulness came to her, it was no more swift in its action than was her first movement.

The instant her eyes opened, leaving behind dreamland's vista of rainbow's ends for the contrasting utter blackness of the cabin of the *Nix*, her feet snapped to the floor as suddenly as though she was but a mechanically operated toy into which instantaneous and startling activities were created by the release of a hidden spring.

Blue Jean was at once comprehendingly awake to every sound, every movement that her senses recorded. For a moment she stood motionless, tense, listening. In the night something spoke to her.

Her next act was to don a close-fitting mannish soft hat. Thereafter boots, heavy skirts, a jersey and an oilskin, each found its place with a precision that, here in this absolute blackness, bespoke the skill of a master of the ways of the sea.

From a locker close at hand came an automatic in its leather holster. This Blue Jean fastened about her waist beneath the oilskin coat. She then slipped out into the cockpit of the *Nix* and flung a hurried glance about her. A dim figure was scurrying down the side of Raggedy Ann from one of the two huts farther up the rocky slope.

Apparently the Shanghai Kid, too, had heard the same cry which had awakened the girl. He was coming now to warn her of something, she felt sure. Blue Jean reached for the painter of the dinghy tied astern, quickly loosed the line, and pulled the small boat alongside.

It took but the fraction of a minute to send the skiff shooting onto the beach. The Shanghai Kid was waiting, breathless from a hurried survey at the top of Raggedy Ann.

"There's a boat workin' around th' wreck," he said, panting, staring past the girl toward the reef to the westward. "I couldn't savvy how many of 'em there was in ut, but they was goin' awful easy, keepin' j'st clear uh th' breakers. Somethin' woke me up what made me clammy all over. I heard ut again some place out there, a kind uh wail. Ugh-h!"

The Shanghai Kid shivered and pointed vaguely toward those naked frames of the broken ship.

"Yes," said Blue Jean evenly, "I heard it. I have heard it before, too, only it has always been during storms. To-night was the first time that I ever knew it to come when the sea was smooth."

A queer little smile played across the features of Blue Jean for an instant, then faded. The screen of night between left Shanghai in ignorance of this faint play of expression that for a fleeting moment lighted the face of Blue Jean Billy Race in a sad little smile.

This strange outlaw woman of the sea seemed for the present to be entirely indifferent to any immediate impending violation of Raggedy Ann by those who might be either of the law or the underworld,

and who, in either case, would certainly not be on a friendly mission, nor one that betokened any good to herself or the Shanghai Kid.

Either this mysterious boat that Shanghai had glimpsed in the night skirting the island was manned by officers who sought her arrest, or it was manned by cutthroats who desired the loot that she herself had taken, men who would allow nothing to stand in their way if there developed any fine points of sportsmanship or the like for them to consider.

The very stealth of their approach proclaimed the fact that their mission in the vicinity was not of a peaceful nature.

Yet in spite of it all Blue Jean found relief rather than dismay as she faced this impending thunderhead on a horizon that had been otherwise entirely free of storm signs. Through all these days and weeks of seclusion from the world beyond, there had always been present the half-haunting realization that sooner or later a show-down must come.

The fugitive is never free of the thought that some day some one will find him—or her—out. It was the one thing the realization of which had been responsible for her clinging so closely to Raggedy Ann instead of seeking safety in flight to a far unknown, to other lands, to that vague haven just across the sea.

For a long time, it seemed to the restive Shanghai Kid, Blue Jean Billy remained standing there just out of reach of the lapping waves with her face turned toward that reef which reached westward from Raggedy Ann and its ghost ship.

"Shanghai," said the girl at last, "did you ever

hear that the masters of sunken ships sometimes return to them in the graveyard of the sea?"

The Shanghai Kid started nervously, glanced apprehensively at the woman beside him, and then long and earnestly out toward that bleak, gaunt frame barely discernible against the sullen sky.

"No, by Gadfrey!" he exclaimed passionately. "I never did hear that, or I'd never come out here."

Again the wistful eyes of Blue Jean Billy searched the night to the west. Apparently she did not hear her companion's reply; if she did, it passed unheeded.

A moment later a new note came. It was the faint *chuck* of an oar in its rowlock. It was startlingly close. The two figures on the shore remained motionless. In the gloom a scant hundred yards away something black and undefinable glided under the stern of the *Nix*.

For a moment it paused. Then silently it slipped beside the *Nix's Mate*. Again there was an instant's hesitation before the sinister visitor moved on toward that spot where the girl and the Shanghai Kid waited.

A lifting roll of an almost spent ground swell and the dory's nose shot onto the stony shore of Raggedy Ann, and there settled to rest amid the rush and gurgle of the waters which raced and fell away on the sloping beach.

The Shanghai Kid made a sudden movement which Blue Jean caught from the corner of her eye, half sensing that it was coming, and interpreted it correctly as one decidedly hostile. Instantly a swift, firm hand reached out and stayed the evolution that had to do with bringing a husky automatic into action.

Shanghai was a firm believer in that old saying which has to do with shooting first and arguing afterward. He was not a gunman in any sense of the word, being rather peaceful by nature, but when things had narrowed to a certain very fine point where life and health hung by a slender thread, the Kid was not one to linger on ceremony.

Long ago he had promised old Quality Bill Race to look out for Blue Jean, and to this end the faithful Shanghai Kid had been laboring for some time, although often he had found the task at hand was resolved into a case of his standing meekly aside and accepting without question the orders of this clear-eyed girl.

Now, with the utmost reluctance, the Shanghai Kid obeyed the silent command, as he let both hands fall empty by his side. Less than a dozen yards away four men were stumbling hurriedly from the dory, grim and silent invaders, each armed and desperate, and filled only with a lust for loot which they were too cowardly to secure firsthand and by their own efforts.

For a long minute Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid remained silently in the shadow of the massive rock that hid them from the searching eyes of this little group of brigands who stood at the base of the steeper incline, seemingly all absorbed in getting their bearings.

Said Mash Market Jake in an undertone at length:

"Bill, you and Yennie take a sneak up to those shacks and see what's doing. Sam and I will jump the biggest boat out here. I don't see or hear anything, so I guess we're all right. That yowling must

have been a mud hen or something. Come on now, let's make a clean-up of this job. You can plug Shanghai and welcome; only take the girl alive, because we have got to get out of her where this precious boodle is banked."

A stone became displaced underfoot and bounced across a slippery rock face and fell at the very feet of Bill Hyle as he turned to begin his stealthy advance up the side of Raggedy Ann. He stopped with startling abruptness.

Tall and straight, square in front of him, was the dim figure of a woman, standing perfectly motionless, but with one arm—her right—canted toward him. Bill Hyle felt rather than saw the black automatic which that hand held. He knew it was there, nevertheless, instinctively. He made no attempt to raise his own weapon which was in his hand by his side.

Neither did Mr. Hyle speak. For the moment his brain had only time to associate this silent form with the haunting cry that had disturbed him earlier.

Yennie, the Ape, crowding close on the heels of the estimable Bill, stopped, stared, and released a half-exploded exclamation of dismay.

Mr. Engle J. Gottlieb was on the point of shoving the dory off. For the moment he had returned his gat to his pocket. He came about face with a snarl, at the same instant reaching for his weapon. The peculiar cry was still clearly defined in his own mind, but he entertained no belief whatsoever in the immortality of ghosts. In the gloom he had failed to note that the figure wore skirts, and in another mo-

ment would have blazed away squarely at this specterlike form.

Jake's intentions were all right, but a voice, clear and sharp as a fall morning, spoke a terse warning that contained a certain unmistakable hair-trigger sentiment which was most compelling.

"Don't move! When I fire I shall shoot to kill!"

Mr. Gottlieb partially overcame that first momentary hesitancy that had spoiled a shot for him, the shock that had been produced by the unexpected cool, defiant voice of a woman here on this black shore, and was steadying his hand in an effort to sneak across a bit of lead for disabling purposes, when a playful wavelet lifted the restless dory and swung it against Jake's legs with a crash.

Engle J. went over backward into the boat with a fearful clatter and several gasping oaths.

Quite as though there had been no interruption, and seemingly unmindful of the lurking danger that might be fermenting in the shadows of the night just beyond her, Blue Jean Billy went on:

"To whom, pray, am I indebted for this visit?"

The Shanghai Kid answered this interrogation from his position at Blue Jean's left by snapping a flash lamp onto the little knot of men at the water's edge.

Mash Market Jake struggled to his feet and became one of the family group that the girl was scanning with shrewd, calculative precision.

At last she said slowly, but with biting scorn:

"A fine, healthy-looking bunch! You r-rats! Not clever enough or courageous enough to play your own hand for the gain you crave, but you must search

out others of your kind and try to wrench from them the miserable, paltry loot of a game you're too yellow to play. I admire your taste, and allow me to congratulate you on your cleverness in a matter where the police have failed."

There was a pause; then Mr. Gottlieb said with a sneer:

"Second thief best owner, you know. And don't be too sure that the bulls have given up the job. Don't be too sure of that, my high-and-mighty lady. Maybe——" Jake leered into the gloom in the direction of the voice just beyond that relentless smear of white light. "Maybe, if you don't be a little mite thoughtful the way you handle this thing, the coppers are going to know all about your cute little hiding place out here in your blasted ocean! Don't forget that, not for a minute!"

Blue Jean's reply was like the darting streaks of fire struck from white-hot iron.

"So that's the game? Good! See that you play it out. Don't forget that you dealt the cards, either! Mash Market Jake, I know you! Bill Hyle, you used to be a decent crook! Yennie, the Ape, you never were any good! Who's the other baron, Shanghai?"

"That guy is Bottle Sam," stated the Shanghai Kid without hesitation. "When they mugged 'im it was Charley Dollard. He's a stool pigeon; he sucks th' bamboo; he's a welcher an' a vogel grafter."

"Mr. Dollard," said Blue Jean with asperity, "you're way above your class." Then with sudden grimness to her tone: "Jake, are you the boss here?"

"Yes," acknowledged Mr. Gottlieb, "I am, and I want to talk business."

Blue Jean Billy ignored the latter part of Mash Market's disclosure.

"That being the case I would earnestly advise you to take your cute little army and get aboard your boat and start rowing. You came out here looking for trouble and if you're on Raggedy Ann two minutes from now you're going to get it. You can take your piece of news and go to the bulls or to blazes. Raggedy Ann is a province of mine, and it has got it all over a cannibal island for primeval rights."

Mr. Gottlieb laughed and edged forward a step or so, peering through half-closed lids out past the circle of light.

"Miss Race," he began mockingly, "you can't bluff me. Mash Market Jake is playing safe. There is a reward posted for any information which will lead to your arrest. You cleaned your prospects good and proper. You got away with cash, pearls, and diamonds. In two hauls you took enough swag to open up in Maiden Lane. The dicks couldn't find you; we did. The breaks are all with us; we're within the law and we are going to make the best of it.

"If you want to make it a showdown that's your lookout. You might just as well make up your mind to come across, because you have picked your nest and you have got to stick. There will never be any getting away, because you haven't got a move left. Perhaps you don't realize how well you are boxed up.

"Let me give you a bit of an outline. If you insist on staying on your high horse, if you put up a fight, no matter what you try, at a signal from me one of the men on our boat out yonder will flash a strong searchlight, which is a prearranged method

of telling another of our men stationed on Point Grief to call police headquarters and slip them the information that Blue Jean Billy is in hiding on an island called Raggedy Ann, four miles west of the Graves. That's all."

"Do you happen to forget that I have you covered?" asked the girl. "Do you suppose I'd hesitate long before shooting you if you gave any manner of signal to your friends out there? There are several hours of night ahead yet, and by the time the cops came I would be a long way from here.

"I believe I understand just about how desperate a game you are playing. Very well. If you want a fight, I am afraid you are going to get it, because certainly I shall make no sort of compromise with you."

There was a grim instant of silence; then Blue Jean spoke to the Shanghai Kid.

"Shanghai," she said, "I am going to count ten. If, when I am done, Mr. Gottlieb still believes he is on a picnic, you may open fire. I choose the gentleman himself and Jackstraw Billy; you may look out for the other two. We are going to take that tender and start for the *Nix* in just ten seconds. Ready! One—two—three—four—five——"

Bottle Sam and Yennie, to say nothing of Bill Hyle, were plainly nervous. Mash Market Jake was still confident. He leered at the girl, and twisted his face into a peculiar snarling grimace.

"Your boats are sinking, if anybody should ask you!" he flung at her with an exultant and savage oath. "Both of them—with a three-quarter-inch hole apiece below the water line."

"Eight," counted Blue Jean stubbornly, "nine——"

In that instant the thing happened. The tiny filament in the bulb of the electric torch, which the Shanghai Kid had centered on the four men on the beach, burned out.

In the first fleeting moment of that utter and confusing blackness which followed, both Billy Race and the Shanghai Kid fired. But on top of those quick, savage reports sounded the shrill, piercing note of a whistle, while almost instantly, from the gloom out toward old Kettle Bottom, there shot into the sky a long, thin finger of light.

It was the signal that would bring the police boiling out to Raggedy Ann in the sturdy and armed police boat, *Harbor II.*

Concerning the uncertainties of his position, Mash Market Jake was taking no chances.

And then, even before the last vibrant note of the whistle had died, there came again that weird human cry—and, in a lull of the crashing of breakers beyond, it came straight from that hulk on the reef of Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XXIX

GINNY VILLAGE

TWO low, barren hills connected by a narrow strip of land and the whole entirely surrounded by water; such is Dilldock's Island.

Steep cliffs of clay mark the extremities of the hills—jumping-off places into the sea. The neck which stretches between is partly marshy and partly sloping, well-drained terrain. Here is laid out a small, ramshackle village—a village of low, patch-work houses and fishing gear.

It is Ginny Village, and known by no other name. It has thirty, perhaps a few more or a few less, one-story and one-story-and-a-half homes, nearly all of which border a grass-grown main street. There are, of course, a few stragglers here and there along the slope, marked by narrow, winding paths which lead to their doors.

A close-bordering beach is piled with driftwood, grimy, scale-coated dories, and an occasional power boat, dried and weather-beaten. There are weary, misshapen shacks; an old sleigh, strangely out of place; piles of brightly painted lobster buoys; stacks of new pots with freshly tarred heads; a torn flag fluttering in the breeze; here and there a strange lean-to partially protecting a rusty stove on its brick legs; while a length of battered stovepipe slouches drunkenly through the boards overhead.

A dusky woman, portly and dignified, was preparing a meal in her open-air kitchenette.

A small, natural harbor to the northward was dotted by the power dories of the Portugee fishermen, while interspersed among them were numerous sluggish, green, and slimy lobster cars.

Night was settling down. Yonder a dory was puttering around the point, homeward bound from delivering a load of crustaceans to the city markets. Another dusky son of toil was tossing the result of his day's labor from his dory into a huge car, through which the water sluiced between the openings of its frame.

On the shore a grizzled veteran of the sea was stubbornly worrying a big bank dory into the water. He wore no hat, and his shaggy, unkempt hair fluttered low over his ears and forehead. His beard was thick and streaked generously with gray.

Regardless of the fact that he wore no boots, and that the water was slapping about his legs almost to his knees, he stood for a long time studying the sky. He turned his face this way and that to get the direction of the light air that stirred; then, at last apparently satisfied as to what he sought, he pushed the boat's nose off shore and stepped in over the stern.

When he took his place at the oars he was standing, facing in the direction of the bow, after the fashion of the old veterans who have long been of the sea.

With short, powerful strokes he headed the dory's nose seaward, and when the thin blanket of night settled through the twilight he was still steadily working out against the flooding tide, always crowd-

ing forward at the handles of the oars, always keeping the stem of the boat squarely under the star he had chosen for his guidance.

From a point on the slope near one of the smaller houses of the village a man was watching, a bronzed, cleancut person of perhaps thirty or thereabouts, so tanned by wind and sun that but for his light hair he might easily have passed for a native son of Ginny Village.

Till the boat had faded in the gloom far out past Windmill Point he continued to gaze in its wake to seaward. For a long time thereafter he was silent, thoughtful, leaning against a corner of the small building that had been his home for the past month. Piece by piece in his brain he was building a strange, intangible something that for the first time in many weeks showed any result whatsoever in connection with the will-o'-the-wisp that had been luring him on.

At last the answer was slowly forming? Had he, almost blindly, stumbled onto a seemingly purposeless hint, which after all was going to prove the very solution that he so long had sought? Certainly he was beginning to see something very clearly.

For several weeks Robert Wood of the International Detective Agency had been working to pick up the trail of Blue Jean Billy Race. At every turn he had been completely baffled, until at last, through two Italian fishermen, he had learned of Portugee Joe, a lobsterman who spent much of his time in a hut far out on the Brewsters.

To get in intimate contact with this reticent character, Mr. Wood had found the only practical method was to become a fisherman himself. By expending a

little capital this had not been a difficult task, together with a little assistance from the fates.

A hoary northeaster, booming down across the bay, had caught a newly laid string of one hundred and fifty pots and left in its wake but a bedraggled dozen. The fisherman who had set them had spent his last dollar for gear. It was the detective's opening, and he grasped it eagerly—and at once found himself a partner in a fishing industry.

A little later the city copper received his baptism of fire in a twenty-foot power dory pulling gear with a heavy sea running. It took considerable nerve to head out at two o'clock in the morning for the one-hour-and-twenty-minutes' run to the outside ledges square in the face of a heavy swell kicked up by a recent easterly, but Bob Wood had set himself grimly to the task, the while he discovered that the dory under him was the ablest craft of its size he had ever seen.

In days that followed he had come to know Portugee Joe, but whatever secrets that dusky gentleman held, he guarded well. Almost in despair of gaining in this manner the clew which he sought, the detective at last had discovered almost under his nose here in Ginny Village a thing that sent the blood boiling through his veins in an exultant flood.

He slumped down on a bundle of lath and sank his head between his hands.

Slowly the lights of the village blinked out, but still Robert Wood of the International sat huddled on his pile of lath, studying, planning, ever laying down new and vague lines to follow.

And then, in a flash, he was on his feet, deter-

mined as to his line of action. He would play it through to-night—now. If his new method of reasoning followed out, all well and good; if it flivvered on him—well, anyhow he would be at the ledges by daylight, and could pull the traps.

He centered the place that he and Gill, his partner, called home, but he did not strike a light. He preferred to go without making any explanation; tomorrow would be his turn at the gear anyway. Unconsciously he moved on tiptoes, but it was not necessary; Gill was asleep, all out of tune as usual, but in a slumber deep enough for the gods to consider with wonder.

Robert Wood secured his oilskins, a heavy sweater —and his automatic from its hiding place in a small chest that he had always kept locked against prying eyes.

Going out, he closed the door behind him softly, which, too, was entirely unnecessary. A moment later he was on the beach. He dumped his stuff into Gill's flat-bottomed skiff and dragged the cranky little tub to the water. A minute later he had transferred his oilskins and sweater to the power dory and had scrambled aboard.

He made the skiff fast to the mooring rope; then slipped the latter from the dory's bow cleat and tossed it overboard. Lazily the power boat swung her nose into the tide, while the man hurriedly crowded back the hatch over the engine compartment.

He snapped the switch in, opened the needle valve a part of a turn, and squirted a priming from a rusty oil can into the cup on the cylinder head; then he

jerked the flywheel up against the compression. Instantly the little five-horse engine caught the spark and began her night's work with a businesslike rush.

Mr. Wood fastened a battered life-preserver overside in such a manner that it covered the exhaust pipe, and thereby considerably deadened the sound of the explosions. He then adjusted the canvas on the center-pole and camped on top of the low engine-cabin roof with one hand on the tiller rope.

He felt strangely nervous. He couldn't tell just why. He was tingling all over. He was not afraid of what he might find this night; and he was. There was something gruesome about the business of poking out here into the sea close on midnight for a visit to an island that fishermen he had met proclaimed to be haunted.

Perhaps it was haunted, but Robert Wood decided that in all probability it was a very human haunt. To-night he would see for himself—for he was going to Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XXX

A STRONG DOOR

AT a hotel in the village of Sea View, close bordering Point Grief, a shifty-eyed individual was arguing with the sleepy proprietor as to the absolute necessity of being allowed the use of the telephone a minute.

"Who be ye, and where do ye come from?" demanded the suspicious personage in his nightshirt.

"I am an operative for a detective agency in town," lied the gentleman without, glibly.

"Le's see yer badge?"

"I haven't any. I have been on a case where anything of that sort would have been liable to give the whole affair dead away. I have no credentials of any sort, but it is absolutely necessary that I get into communication with police headquarters immediately."

"Why don't ye go down to th' calaboose and get Jim Hines? He's chief out here to Sea View."

"No, no, it isn't the local police that I want," insisted the stranger. "I have got to get in touch with the harbor police boat—at once. You can stand beside me while I talk, and, if it will make you feel any better, you can keep me covered with a gat, if you've got one there."

The innkeeper had; it was hidden behind the folds of the nightshirt. He exhibited it now, an old-

fashioned, single-action affair. The gentleman was taking no chances, not with automobile and tea-store thieves and everything floating around. He opened the door and stepped back, jerking his head toward the darkened office.

"All right, young feller, right in there on yer left you'll find the booth. That's it, that door thar!"

The stranger entered as directed, and started to pull the door to after him—but found it already on the way with marked violence. It closed with a crash, while almost instantly there was the sound of the bolt shooting into place.

From within came a heave of flesh against the door and a sudden wild outburst of profanity.

"Yell, gorl darn ye," called the exultant gentleman without. "If ye holler loud enough you probably won't have to telephone th' perleece; maybe they'll hear ye. While ye are tryin' t' get 'em, I'll get on some breeches and go find Jim."

"Where's the telephone?" bawled a voice from within. "There ain't no instrument in here."

"No, an' there never was, an' probably there never will be. But it's a darn good closet, an' it's got a good strong door, an' if ye get tired waitin' there's some town reports on th' shelf for ye to read."

Followed a loud and violent request for immediate release, together with considerable language of a bluish tinge punctuating arguments for the defense.

But it was all for naught; Mr. Gale of the Sea View House was obdurate.

"There's been too dummed many of you night-hawks gallivantin' around loose raisin' hob fer me to take any chances. You may be all right, and you

may be a bu'glar. I dunno; but half past one in th' mornin' ain't no time to be prowlin' up an' down th' land lookin' for a chanct to telephone."

Further demonstrations came from within, shrill and wicked.

"Shut up!" said Mr. Gale dispassionately. "I'm goin' to get Jim Hines an' tell him what I got."

Mr. Hines' verdict was short and to the point. Briefly he informed the nerve-wrought stranger that the gentleman could save his breath—and tell it all to the judge in the morning.

One little detail Mr. Gottlieb had overlooked, and that was providing for suitable communication between his lookout on Point Grief and the front office. In fact, so sure had he been that Blue Jean Billy Race would grab at the chance to split her loot rather than face arrest, that the placing of the "crow" at Sea View had been merely a sort of second-line defense.

Little had Mash Market Jake reckoned with the spirit of old Quality Bill's girl.

CHAPTER XXXI

HARD PRESSED

WITH the sudden and unexpected severing of that source of illumination when the light in the hand of the Shanghai Kid failed, came an unexpected shift of fortunes. The swiftly moving drama, weaving its lines in and out among the crags of the sea, suddenly sent all its men on the board tumbling helter-skelter that none might say who would be the first to hold the checkmate again.

Neither of the shots fired by Blue Jean and the Shanghai Kid reached its mark. The unexpectedness of the thing for a moment produced confusion. The Shanghai Kid found his footing poor, and, in trying to retain it, slipped; Blue Jean, half expecting a sudden onslaught, neglected her aim in a partial endeavor to place herself securely on the defense.

Mr. Gottlieb and Bottle Sam flung themselves instantly behind a friendly rock. Bill Hyle lunged awkwardly away in a play for distance; he would have gone farther but for a slippery, weed-coated rock which brought him down heavily. Yennie, the Ape, like the true gunman that he was, was strictly in his element.

He crouched; then he lunged forward toward that spot whence the light had come, laying a sweeping curtain of lead ahead of him. With the last instructions of Mr. Gottlieb still in his ears, he had deter-

mined to polish off the Shanghai Kid once and for all.

The one thing that Yennie forgot in his mad rush was the fact that, in the natural order of things, Shanghai, too, would seek a little quiet and seclusion close to the ground. The Ape's spray of death spattered against the rock walls of Raggedy Ann considerably above that spot where the agile gentleman beyond was catapulting himself forward for a flying tackle, straight at Yennie's dim, shadowlike legs.

The Ape had been presented with his chance, and had missed. Not so with Shanghai, who was possessed of a wide reach, consisting of long, flaillike arms. When Yennie, the Ape, stumbled into them, it was as though he had blundered into a wire entanglement.

With a savage directness of the closing of the jaws of a trap, Shanghai set his arms about the knees of Yennie in a sweet, clean tackle of the flying variety. The latter came down hard, and all at once. He was upright—and then he was not.

A series of wide, uneven natural steps, each wet and treacherous and sloping toward the water, provided the props for the scene. Down this declivity the lurching figures crashed, rolling from bump to bump with surprising disregard for everything but an early opportunity to batter each other into a state of unconditional surrender, voluntary or otherwise.

The Shanghai Kid was at a disadvantage in so far as his arms, for the present, were occupied, while those of Yennie, the Ape, were free to maul unmercifully at the Kid's head. In consideration of the fact

that Yennie still retained his grip on the now empty automatic, this was harsh treatment.

An instant later a plunge into shallow water brought relief to Shanghai for the moment. He released his grip on the anatomy of the other, and, fighting off the pain that surged through his bleeding head, struggled unsteadily to his feet.

Blinded, dizzy, chilled by his sudden immersion, the Shanghai Kid never for an instant relaxed his grim offensive. Every instant was precious, for while he was attempting to subdue the vicious Yennie, Blue Jean must fight her battle against the odds of three to one.

Desperately Shanghai struggled to get his gun into play. There was no time now for uncertain hand-to-hand encounters. His fingers, trembling and overanxious, in their frantic attempt to wrench the automatic free, fumbled that bulky butt even as the weapon was slipping clear of its holster. In a flash the gat had eluded the last, hopeless effort to retain it, and had plunged into the water with a heartrending splash.

There was no time to attempt to recover it, for Yennie, the Ape, was already on his feet and closing in. Being entirely averse to two-fisted affairs, the latter gentleman had now brought a huge clasp knife into play. Valiantly did he attempt to insert it between the ribs of the Shanghai Kid, lunging with a crouch as usual, and sweeping his right hand upward with savage intent.

Instinctively Shanghai guessed the import of that one-handed movement, and instantly he gave his undivided attention to that menacing right hand of his

opponent. With both hands he grabbed for the other's wrist, missed, stumbled again in the knee-deep water, and, together with the Ape, went over once more, the pair this time floundering to their waists.

Above the gurgle of water about his ears, the Shanghai Kid caught the occasional vicious spat of an automatic somewhere in the blackness beyond him. Blue Jean was fighting her battle behind the shelter of a low rock, while she watched for a chance to edge herself nearer the water. The one foremost thought in her mind was for the big, sturdy *Nix*.

If it were true that the vindictive Jake had scuttled her boats as he passed in, soon her last chance of a further retreat would be entirely shut off. The *Nix's Mate* did not matter, but the powerful *Nix* with its auxiliary sail was the one on which she had pinned her hope for that last flight to safety and peace somewhere along those lanes of the world that she would one day select as the ultimate haven.

Swiftly many things flashed through her brain now as she crouched behind her tiny fortress, tense and watchful, with the black muzzle of her big automatic peeping watchfully over the crest of this jagged stone.

A three-quarter-inch hole in the speedy, lightly constructed hydroplane, with its great engine, would do its work with alarming promptness. The powerful motor in the frail hull would send the craft to the bottom with no hope whatsoever of salvaging her.

With the larger boat it would be different. Her size and construction were such that till she was awash there would be the fighting chance that the

hole might be located and plugged and the sturdy wanderer of the sea saved from Davy Jones.

But there must be no time lost; every inch the water gained on the *Nix's* precious spare batteries and the tiny air vent in the gasoline tanks just so much lessened Blue Jean Billy's chances of safety in flight. She would have to make a dash and swim for it, she decided.

Then, almost at once, came the heartbreaking realization that even should she succeed in reaching the water in safety, her very flight would put her at a disadvantage for the reason that Mash Market Jake and his men in the dory, which, without doubt, they would instantly utilize, would then have all the advantage with them.

She could not swim and fight; neither could she hope to reach the boat without laying herself open to their fire from the pursuing dory. For a moment Blue Jean's heart sank within her. She suddenly found herself all a-tremble. It seemed for an instant that her wonderful nerve was going to desert her in the face of this seemingly overwhelming and savage attack.

Stubbornly she fought to gain absolute control of those jangling nerve centers, to be able once more to think clearly and with her usual lightning promptness. She needed, she knew, every atom of courage and determination that she possessed—or, she could quietly say, "I'm done!" Even then, should she surrender all the loot that she held, there was the ever-present possibility that Mash Market Jake and his hirelings would forsake her here on her beloved Rag-

gedy Ann helplessly to await the coming of the police boat.

Blue Jean Billy Race could never remember, dating away back to those innocent school days of the long ago, when she had hollered: "'Nuff!"

It had not been in her make-up then; it was not now. She would fight this thing out.

Even during the lull in activities, when these thoughts were swiftly coursing through the girl's brain, Mr. Engle J. Gottlieb was considering, also, the possibility of a bone that he had pulled.

When he had passed in by the *Nix* and the *Nix's Mate* and had silently bored those holes, his one thought had been to sever Blue Jean's line of retreat in a way that would allow him to gain his point, and then, whatever came, he could at least work the boats onto the beach and search them for the possible hiding place of the wealth that he sought.

This had been his earlier cogitation, and had been considered in case Blue Jean Billy should perform in a manner which might reasonably be expected of her. Now Jake realized that he had put his foot in something that looked like hard going. He understood perfectly that any attempt on his part to reach either the *Nix* or the *Nix's Mate* at this juncture would be apt to prove a most gosh-awfully sure manner of courting admission to another world.

More and more he felt that perhaps he had bungled things slightly. Certainly there was but one thing to accomplish first—and that had to do with the removal of this wildfire girl and her equally pugnacious bodyguard. With this most credible undertaking in mind he began a slow-flank movement.

By advancing a dozen feet or so from the spot where he was flattened against the rock, he would be able, he believed, to make things sufficiently hot for Miss Race to the extent that she would see the error of her ways and offer to arbitrate the thing—or she would be beyond that stage.

After a brief whispered consultation with Bottle Sam, Mr. Gottlieb began his journey, a movement which was unnoticed by Blue Jean.

Regardless of the Shanghai Kid's natural aversion to water, he found in the present moment that it was the one lane open to him. Too, his mind was on the sinking *Nix* and the possibility of checking that jetting inrush of water. Yennie, the Ape, was preparing for another charge with that long-bladed knife. Yet the Shanghai Kid delayed, glancing apprehensively toward that spot where he had last seen Blue Jean.

After a little he decided to risk the chance of getting his head shot off by calling to her. He moved out into deeper water; then from a point where he could just touch bottom he raised his voice above the slow grumble of the breakers on the outside of the island.

"C'n yeh hold them, Jean, till I c'n go out an' try to plug th' *Nix?*"

Instantly there were several spiteful flashes in the gloom, while there whined past the Shanghai Kid's ears little hurried messengers of destruction, one of which even kicked a handful of water almost into the Kid's face. That gentleman shook his head, and swore softly to himself.

From the shore came Blue Jean Billy's reply, perfectly phrased and in as even tones as though she

were requesting an audience with the Four Hundred instead of talking to a battered pal of the underworld in a last-ditch fight when every sound meant drawing a hail of lead from several waiting automatics.

"Good boy!" she cried, in a cool, clear voice. "It's our only chance, Shanghai. Look near the stern on the starboard side; that's where I saw them first. Get anything in to hold it for a little while. Can you make it?"

"I guess so! Don't fret about Shanghai. I c'n swim ut O. K. Yennie is going t' race me with his toad sticker!"

Which was just exactly what the Ape had in mind even before the Shanghai Kid had finished speaking.

There was a boiling rush in the water, and Yennie, the Ape, was lunging through with the speedy crawl stroke, while the only thing in Shanghai's repertoire was the antediluvian breast stroke, time-tried and true, but slower than abiding grace.

Shanghai flung one hurried glance over his shoulder—and submerged. Mr. Kurtz immediately dived, prodding ahead of him as he did so promiscuously with his knife. The Shanghai Kid was not a rapid-fire thinker, but instinctively he always seemed to know just what to do in an emergency.

He went to the bottom, pawing his way down with dispatch, and at the same time crowding off sideways to avoid the deadly thrust of the man behind. Clawing at the uneven floor of the cove, his lungs seemingly on the point of bursting and his head throbbing, the Shanghai Kid's right hand came in contact with several round, water-worn stones.

Almost mechanically the Kid clutched at one. He wondered that he had not thought of it before. Certainly in those happy bygone days in the old Bowery a brick would have been the first weapon chosen, and many could have testified to the deadliness of the same in this youngster's hands.

Sputtering and gasping, the Shanghai Kid shot to the surface. Already Mike Kurtz was there waiting, about a dozen feet away. Once more he lunged. Like the fighter that he was, he had, in the heat of battle, become obsessed with a wild fury which centered about that floundering figure in the black water before him. He would be more careful this time; it would only take one well-placed thrust.

Craftily Shanghai backed away toward the shore, feeling always with his toes for bottom. When he had found it and could place both feet on it securely, he waited silently. Yennie, the Ape, swam cautiously closer, timing his next darting lunge with deadly precision.

Then it was that the Shanghai Kid pushed one foot a bit forward, jerked his right arm backward and clear of the water that it might not interfere with his aim, and sent the stone hurtling square into the face of the Ape. Without a sound the latter crumpled up and limply slipped out of sight beneath the waters of Raggedy Ann's tiny harbor.

Shortly thereafter the Shanghai Kid was struggling aboard the half-submerged *Nix*. His first act there was to call encouragement to Blue Jean. Twice he shouted her name; then listened intently. But from the shore of Raggedy Ann there came no welcoming answering hail.

CHAPTER XXXII

WHAT WOOD FOUND

SOMEWHERE in the night to the northwest, from up in the direction of Gran Banan, there sounded the faint, steady beat of a "one lunger." It was very indistinct, and of a sort of pulsing vibration that one almost sensed rather than heard.

Rhythmic, and apparently never changing its position, neither approaching nor drawing away, so far as the ear could determine, it seemed to hang in the night air in first one and then in several positions.

One-eyed Slade, camped on the cabin roof of the boat anchored off Kettle Bottom Rock, heard it, but let it in no way interfere with his peace of mind, no more than had the occasional yelp of an automatic there in the night on Raggedy Ann.

The Shanghai Kid, having discovered the hole which Jake had bored in the *Nix* and temporarily plugged it with a bit of wood wrapped about with a piece of his handkerchief, also noted the faint drum of that prowler of the night during those grim moments when he awaited an answer to his hail.

Still perched on the edge of the diminutive cabin which sheltered his engine, peering over the canvas on his center pole, as he picked his way down past the long, low Rumstick Shoal and out through the famous Hungry Hole, Robert Wood came gliding on toward Raggedy Ann.

When he was abeam of Hue-and-cry Rocks, he closed the throttle of the sturdy little engine, allowing her to kick along with an almost unbelievable silence. Even the swish of the bow wave now died to just a faint ripple of disturbed waters. To further lessen the sound of his approach, the detective closed the hatch over the engine that even the low chatter of the make-and-break parts might be thoroughly muffled.

In this manner Mr. Wood ran for ten minutes, until he could discern the dim outline of the island that he sought. From a safe distance he circled it once. Suddenly he saw almost dead ahead the black shadow of a sloop-rigged vessel. She carried no lights and appeared to be deserted, or else those aboard were asleep.

A quick survey through the gloom, and the detective decided at once that the boat was not the *Nix*, of which he had a very excellent description. He sheered off and then started to work his way back around the island, puzzling many things in his mind. Mighty few boats frequented that nasty little stretch of water in the lee of Kettle Bottom. What was this fellow doing out here?

Mr. Robert Wood decided that perhaps he was getting into something. This conclusion was strengthened considerably a moment later when the glare of a searchlight from the mysterious boat caught him full in the face. A vagrant breath of air had taken the faint note of his going back to One-eyed Slade, while this gentleman had immediately made a rapid and exceedingly thorough survey by aid of his one perfect member with the result set down.

Mr. Sondheim, now feeling a bit free to exercise his authority here on the high seas, chanced a shot along the path of the light, and added the verbal injunction to "Beat it!"

Mr. Wood did this little thing, heading northeast past Raggedy Ann. While One-eyed Slade, believing that the intruder was none other than some stray fisherman wandering home with, maybe, a crippled engine or something, once more settled himself to await that flash-light signal from the returning Mr. Gottlieb and his associates.

However, a retreat, at the present moment, was the thing furthest from the mind of Robert Wood. Suddenly he was possessed with an earnest desire to further his acquaintance with this spot in the sea of which strange stories were told, while he was firmly convinced, from what he had already observed, that it would require no very great demonstration now to shatter the last vestige of any incredulity that he had previously entertained.

"And I've hauled gear within sight of this place six weeks," he mused, as he peered through the inky blackness in toward those somber walls beyond the lazy pound of the ground swell against the rock, "and never dreamed of coming in here to explore until—until——"

Somewhere close off his bow, apparently a bit farther to the northwest of the island, there sounded a fusillade of shots. Then came a momentary silence, followed by a half dozen reports at intermittent intervals.

Instantly the detective snapped out the switch and stopped the engine.

He had come out here frankly skeptical of certain strange tales that he had heard, together with the sole idea of proving out a certain line of reasoning that had been developed in his mind, and found that he had far underestimated the possibilities of the place.

As near as he could judge by a few minor details, which had presented themselves during the past few minutes, he believed that almost anything of a distinctly ugly nature might readily be expected.

Surely it was a weird spot, this rugged bit of an island far out in the sea, shrouded so completely by the blanket of darkness. But the thing that gripped Robert Wood concerned the pistol reports that sounded here close ahead of him. His fingers strayed almost mechanically to the butt of his own weapon; then fondled the switch beside him.

Should he start his engine and move on toward that spot whence the firing had seemed to come? Should he drop his anchor here and attempt to swim through the surf and trust to getting a footing without being crushed against some unseen jagged rock?

After a little careful consideration Mr. Wood decided to continue on around the island to the north. Somewhere there must be a place to land. Others were there before him. He would search for that boat, or boats, that must already have made their landing.

After a moment's hesitation, as he toyed with the engine's flywheel, the detective decided that it might be as well not to continue his explorations under power, but rather to bring into play the spare oars which the boat carried.

A minute later he was again moving ahead slowly and silently. At the end of perhaps five minutes he was close to that narrow opening between the ledges which led to the cove that so short a time ago had been the scene of the duel between Yennie, the Ape, and the Shanghai Kid.

For a long time the detective hung on his oar handles, listening intently. At first he could hear nothing but the lap of the water; then, very indistinctly, the murmur of voices reached him.

Quietly the International man, every sense alert, his eyes straining into the thick gloom beyond, edged the power dory into Raggedy Ann's miniature harbor.

He had progressed a hundred yards or so when there came within his range of vision the murky outline of an auxiliary-rigged power craft that seemed to be floating very low in the water. Immediately Robert Wood recognized it as the famous *Nix,* the long-sought outlaw boat.

From the porthole he caught the flash of an electric torch; then he heard the splash of water as though some one were wading. Again came the murmur of voices, male voices, and the occasional punctuation of a sentence by an oath.

For a moment the dick was undecided. He was looking for Blue Jean, and he found himself suddenly fearful for her safety. With him it had all been a game, this battle of wits between himself and the girl, and in spite of his determination to win for the law, he had always admired this wonderful woman, who had youth, beauty, and education, and yet had chosen to follow in her father's footsteps of the underworld.

With them both, he felt, it had been, was still, a sporting proposition. If he won, it would be only a part of the day's work; if the girl gained her freedom and completed that final get-away without having to face the trial judge for her offenses against society, so much for her cleverness and the fact that in her outlaw rôle she had always come away clean.

There was nothing behind her for regret, nothing marked against her except her frightful disregard for the seventh commandment, which had to do with the appropriation of money and jewels contributed reluctantly by ladies and gentlemen of Four Hundred Acre upon the two occasions when Blue Jean Billy Race had for a time entered gayly into the social whirl.

Something about that gray boat that was the girl's, half submerged there in the water, and the heavy, profane voices coming from its cabin, the silence of Raggedy Ann, and the mysteries that had long been associated with the place—all served to create in the heart of Robert Wood a violent horror of what he might find there on that rocky shore.

Very cautiously the detective sent his boat closer to the shore beyond. It seemed that he had been unobserved by those aboard the *Nix*. Mr. Wood felt a distinct relief at this. He fully expected to get into a fight before he was done, but he did want a little time to get acquainted with things—to see what was what and how the game shaped up.

More than anything, he had to admit within himself, it was Blue Jean herself he wanted to see, to know that she was unharmed, that she had not suffered injury or death at the hands of a gang of un-

known water pirates, who, it seemed, had stumbled onto her hiding place.

The bow of the little lobster dory bumped the rocks of the island gently. Very softly Robert Wood lowered the anchor over the side and paid out a little rope; then took a turn about the cleat forward and stepped overboard into the shallow water.

In his right hand he gripped his automatic; with his left he guided himself carefully along the side of the boat, lifting and placing his feet at each step with the utmost caution.

At the water's edge he paused, while his eyes became a bit more accustomed to the blackness which engulfed him. It was some moments before he again moved ahead. A startling premonition had gripped him, or else it was that his ears were playing him pranks. Was it a sixth sense warning him, or did he really hear a strange sort of catchy breathing?

He crouched low and peered close along the ground. A faint moan startled him, and he stood erect again. He advanced three paces, stepping on his toes and feeling for treacherous rolling stones. Again he halted and listened. No; he had not been mistaken; there was a black shape on the ground just ahead of him. It was moaning softly now.

Quickly the detective moved forward. Before him lay a limp bundle of humanity, twisted, face downward, in a grim and startling posture. It was a woman—Blue Jean Billy Race.

Robert Wood knelt and gently straightened the helpless figure. His hands touched the forehead—and came away wet and sticky.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "They've shot her!"

The girl was breathing, but in gaspy half sobs. The man beside her attempted to learn how badly she had been hit, but it was impossible without the aid of a light, and for the time being that was out of the question. He would first try to get her into his boat, or perhaps it would be better to move her to a more secluded spot on the island until he had given her first aid before taking her away.

Still, if those who had earlier tried to murder her, found that an attempt was being made to render assistance to the stricken Blue Jean, they would, in all probability, object strenuously to such an arrangement.

Robert Wood realized full well that it was the work of a desperate assortment of gangsters, who had found it necessary to make the play in order to complete their looting of the girl's treasure. The detective at once established the connection of the sloop-rigged vessel with those men who were at this moment ransacking the sinking *Nix*.

A sudden savage rage flashed through him as he began to comprehend the mercilessness with which the thing had been carried out. He even found himself glancing about for the body of the Shanghai Kid, for he had known well of the devotion of the latter for old Quality Bill's girl, and realized that Shanghai would never have deserted Blue Jean Billy as long as he had a drop of blood left to give for her.

Carefully the detective gathered the woman in his arms and moved back along the slope of Raggedy Ann with her. He had taken but a few steps when a savage exclamation from the shore caused him to

turn his head. The presence of his dory had been discovered.

He quickly lowered his burden and crouched before it with his gat in position for sudden hostilities. He tried to see how many he would have to deal with. There seemed to be but two talking.

In that instant there was a swift movement behind him, a rush of hurrying feet, an oath, and then—unconsciousness.

A clubbed automatic had crashed against his temple with force enough to have tumbled an ox. Bottle Sam, returning from an exploration of the two huts on the rocks above, had been observing Mr. Wood's activities for some minutes.

Raggedy Ann was completely in control of Mash Market Jake and his two remaining consorts, Mr. Dollard and Mr. Hyle.

Yennie, the Ape, was still somewhere out in the black water of the cove. After Blue Jean had crumpled into an inert heap, following a close-aimed shot from the gun of Mr. Gottlieb, the trio had attacked the Shanghai Kid aboard the *Nix*. The Shanghai Kid, powerless to withstand the savage attack which had been directed at him, was slouched grotesquely across the transom seat in the cockpit of the *Nix*, half in the water which nearly filled the boat, and half out.

He was breathing, but very faintly.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TURNED ADRIFT

"BUT the bulls," Jackstraw Billy was saying, crabbing impatiently at Mr. Gottlieb. "You lost your nut and signaled Slade to relay the word to Butch up there on Point Grief, that he could slip the glad tidings to the front office that the girl was hiding on Raggedy Ann. If you hadn't got cold feet in too much of a hurry, we wouldn't 'a' had a blasted thing to fret about now. As she stands, though, the coppers are liable to come boiling out here most any minute; I can't savvy how it happens that they didn't show up before this."

"How'd I know that the filly was going to fight like a blasted wildcat?" demanded Mash Market Jake, with an oath. "What are you kicking about, anyhow? We got the stuff, didn't we? Got a bigger haul out there on that old tub than we would in the mint. Ain't that right?"

"That may all be, but what are we going to do with the girl and this other clam digger, or whatever he is? If the bulls find them all here when they come, and they are croaked, and the coppers get inquisitive like they are apt to, well, I ain't hankering to get tried for murder. Maybe you are."

"Now listen here, Hyle," snapped Mr. Gottlieb aggressively, "we've got just one thing to do, and that is this: We have got to clean up after ourselves,

and we have got to do it pronto. There is no need yapping at me; I was playing it safe. If we couldn't make her tell where the stuff was, and she wouldn't split, and she got us dead to rights, like she pretty near did, our only chance to make a dollar was to do just exactly what we done—keep her here till the coppers came and then demand the reward that was posted by some of those big bugs. You knew what the game was just as well as I did. So what's the use of bellyaching like that now?"

"Well, what I want to know is—what are you going to do? We can't go off and leave this mess; we've got to have time to get under cover if we want to play it safe."

"Listen," snapped Mr. Gottlieb. "That speed boat she had, sunk. The big tub is half gone; when we get out of here we'll put a couple more holes in it, tow it a bit into deep water, and let her go. Put the Shanghai Kid in the cabin and he's taken care of. Yennie, the Ape, cashed in, but we should worry; that's one less head to count when the graft is pooled for the final divvy.

"Whoever this other mutt is who come butting in, he didn't head in here with some purpose. The girl knows us all, and that makes it that there is only one thing to do now. We don't want to take any chance of her washing up some place and starting the bulls all off again after everything is quieted down nicely and they are all wondering what ever did become of that there Blue Jean Billy. Ain't that so, Hyle? I leave it to you, Sam."

Jackstraw Billy assented reluctantly. He hadn't intended to get into anything so deep as this. He was

fearful of the coming of that ugly little *Harbor II.;* his face was turned furtively toward the north whence it would come. Bottle Sam believed that Jake had spoken wisely, and was for getting the business over with, so that they might be on their way.

"Well, what'll we do with 'em?" he demanded, jerking his head toward the figures of the man and the woman.

"Take them out to that old wreck on the reef and tie them inside of it. The tide will do the rest when it comes in. Nobody will ever think to look there, even if the bulls do come out to give the place the once-over."

Bill Hyle shuddered. "After that ha'nt yelling there?" he demanded.

"Haunt, me grandmother!" came from Mash Market Jake in a fresh outburst. "I tell you that was a blasted mud hen or a gull or something." And then, with cold-blooded humor: "Anyhow, it would make a couple more ghosts to keep his nibs company. Come on now, lend a hand; we want to be shut of this place in ten minutes."

With a cruel disregard for anything but their own convenience, Engle J. Gottlieb, Bottle Sam, and Bill Hyle turned their attention to the work of getting an unpleasant task over with in the shortest possible time.

As though they were but bundles of rags, the woman, still moaning softly, and Robert Wood, enduring the first agonies of returning consciousness, were dragged roughly over the low weed-covered ledges which, at low water, formed a connecting

link between Raggedy Ann itself and the reef to the west of the island.

Through a jagged aperture in the bow of all that remained of the once-massive hull, the two inert forms were bundled unceremoniously. A green, slimy moss coated everything. Here and there were tiny pools of water left from the last flooding tide. Kelp, rockweed, and all manner of flotsam of the sea were lodged in the place.

Every step was an effort because no foothold was certain.

"That's far enough," said Jake, puffing heavily, as he flashed his torch along the massive keelson. "Dump 'em down there beside the keel. Sam, where's that rope? No, I'll make the hitch; nothing will ever loosen the knots I make."

Swiftly Mash Market Jake performed his task, and performed it well. Savagely he jerked the looping strands of the rope till there was absolutely no looseness felt.

"And when the water reaches it," he informed his companions, "it'll come a darned sight tighter. No fear of the lady and gentleman ever quitting their ship, and one of these days there'll come a storm and a whooping big tide pushed in ahead of an easter, and the old girl will slide off of here and go down for keeps."

Mash Market Jake chuckled as he put the finishing touches to his handiwork.

With a jerk he made fast the last knot and arose, playing his flash lamp on Blue Jean and Robert Wood, the one to the right, the other to the left of

the great keel. It was his final inspection, and, apparently, Mr. Gottlieb was satisfied.

Quickly now he withdrew, following close on the heels of Sam and Jackstraw Billy, both of whom were retreating with considerable haste, and regardless of the uncertainty of their footing. One thought was foremost in the minds of all, and that was immediately to place all the distance possible between themselves and this grim island of the sea.

The small dinghy which earlier that night had been tied astern of the *Nix* they would punch a hole in and set adrift. The power dory in which the sunburned gent had arrived they would also turn loose. They then would be done with Raggedy Ann.

Without the loss of a moment the work of clearing away began. It took but a short time to free the two boats on the shore. Followed the grim task of casting off the mooring lines which held the *Nix*. Already the big boat was nearly awash. The harder task was to get it clear of the cove and out into the deep water to the north of the island.

The Shanghai Kid was still in the cockpit, half sitting, half reclining on the transom seat. The play of the water gently moved him this way and that. The slow heave of his chest had stopped now.

Mash Market Jake had changed his mind. He did not attempt to place the other in the cabin of the boat: he was amply content to allow matters to remain as they stood. The Shanghai Kid was dead. For the charge that old Quality Bill had given him he had lain down all that he had to give, and was on his last journey in the old *Nix*, that, too, had been handed down by that old veteran of the sea, and, in later years, of the underworld.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MAN ON THE BRIDGE

IT came from off a glass-smooth sea without an instant's warning, a quick breath of chill wind from the east.

Several puffy little blasts followed; then there was a lull. But even as the wind died for a few moments, the whole surface of the sea changed. From an oily evenness it turned to a deep blue which was covered with a mass of tiny ripples.

Then the wind came again; this time in a succession of savage little squalls, which flecked the sea with white. Far out in the night there sounded a low roar and a slow-mounting swish of the waters.

On a distant horizon a bit of yellow light played. The wind increased, losing its puffiness as it came, and gaining in forceful intensity.

Hurriedly Mash Market Jake cast loose from the *Nix*. Came a warning whistle from the sloop, shrill and timorous, and a moment later the white finger of the searchlight playing over the water.

And then, once more, there sounded that cry from Raggedy Ann.

"Say," cried Bill Hyle, "for the love of Mike, Sam, put a little beef behind those oars and let's get out of this place."

"It's going to blow," said Mash Market Jake, staring into the night to the east, "and it's going to blow hard!"

The sea had turned; the storm was coming with the tide. The force of the wind reached the velocity of a moderate gale. One-eyed Slade shouted a frantic warning. Then almost, it seemed, in answer to the latter's exhortation for those in the dory to hurry, there again sounded that strange, deep-throated cry from that stark hulk beyond.

Bottle Sam swore with frantic abandon, his left oar slipped from its rowlock, and he sprawled backward. The wind caught the high-sided dory and swung it toward the now seething waters of Hypocrite Channel which bounded Raggedy Ann on the south.

It was only by the most desperate efforts that the boat's nose was swung again in the direction of the sloop, and even then there seemed to be no headway. For ten minutes the two men strained at the oars. The wind had become a steady, sullen roar; its velocity was reaching that of a tempest.

Each wave was capped with a curling crest of boiling white, and yet this was but the squall which preceded the storm.

The Roaring Bulls were rumbling ominously, while a spouting smother of foam entirely enveloped these famous rocks. Beyond, the Graves was monotonously counting off its flashes of warning—one—two, one—two. The Centurion to the west blazed and died with slow, ponderous precision.

Mash Market Jake was suddenly bereft of his previous cruel, cold-blooded spirit. He crouched in the stern and stared with wide-set and glassy eyes at the rolling sloop so near and yet so far away. A wave, darting in from seaward, lifted the dory like a

chip; then flung it into the hollow before the one following, which broke as the dory started to rise, and flung half a barrel of water over the side.

It was only the quick thinking of One-eyed Slade that saved them. Snatching a life-preserver, he made it fast to a line. This he paid out, allowing the wind and sea to carry the life-preserver down toward the men in the small boat. Soon it was within their reach. In their haste to secure it, the boat was nearly swamped.

But at last Bill Hyle was able to reach it with an oar. Silently he grasped the life-saving line, while slowly the dory was hauled alongside the sloop. But even the larger boat was rolling and tossing fearfully.

Ahead was a boiling sea, black and fearful; behind, Kettle Bottom Rock, Raggedy Ann, and that reef with all that remained of its ghost-ship that, too, had been caught in these waters beside the well-named Graves.

"What do you say, Jake," called One-eyed Slade, raising his voice against the boom of the surf and the howl of the wind, "are we goin' to ride ut out here or had we better get in th' hook an' run for ut?"

Mr. Gottlieb was not as brave as he previously had been during certain gruesome operations on Raggedy Ann. He glanced fearfully into the night and shuddered. The storm was an awful thing; every moment it was getting worse. It seemed that the wind could be no heavier, and yet it continually grew in violence. At last he said: "I guess we'd better stay where we are. It may quit soon."

One-eyed Slade shook his head doubtfully. "May-

be, but she's coming with th' tide. Ut looks bad. An easter may blow f'r three days, and scarce let up a hair."

Bill Hyle was scanning the waters. Something in the sea caught his eye.

A water-logged object which every sea submerged, rode slowly past. It was heading for the outer breakers on Raggedy Ann. It was the *Nix*. She was going back to her mistress.

Bottle Sam, already seeing the faces of dead men in the sea, cried out in sudden hysteria.

Mash Market Jake struck at him, and uttered a savage oath. Yet he found himself staring at that sodden thing out there, tangled in the ropes of the cockpit, riding slowly by in that specterlike boat that seemed sullenly to defy the mighty force of the wind and sea to send her to Davy Jones.

A few minutes later the rain came. There was a play of lightning, vivid, and darting forks; then a savage crash of thunder. Followed a squall of hail. More lightning played along the horizon. A bright flash illuminated Raggedy Ann, throwing the whole island into a sudden relief.

"Look!" It was a man's scream. Bill Hyle grabbed the arm of Mr. Gottlieb in a grip of iron; then pointed fearfully toward that reef of Raggedy Ann. "The ha'nt!" he cried shrilly. "I saw it! It was standing high up on the wreck!"

Mash Market laughed harshly, but with a certain strained nervousness.

"Aw, you've got bats!" he snapped. "You're loony, you big lubber!"

Nevertheless he found himself concentrating his

gaze squarely where the next lightning flash would reveal that mighty skeleton of a ship.

Again there was a vivid play of light.

"Holy Gadfrey!" This time it was Engel J. Gottlieb himself. With his own eyes he had seen it, while even as he looked, he saw a movement; then, even above the noise of the tempest, there came the sound of some vague command.

The four men now on the pitching sloop all waited breathlessly for the next play of light. The broken ship on the reef forced the attention of all as though it were a strange siren of the sea, who held them enchanted, helpless, while their boat drifted to destruction.

There came another flash which clearly defined the figure of a man far above the waves. standing erect on the highest point of that skeleton, gesticulating strangely with his arms. Frequently, through lulls in the gale, he could be heard shouting his weird commands.

"What are we waiting for?" demanded Bottle Sam, having regained a little of his former composure. "Can't we get away from here?"

Mr. Sondheim shook his head dubiously. "I dunno!" he muttered, glancing fearfully at the giant combers that came steadily beating in from seaward. "As long as th' hook holds we're better off where we are. We ain't got no room. There's Kettle Bottom, and there's th' reef, right there behind us! Listen t' 'em! Great Maud, listen to them breakers! We won't last a minute if we get into 'em."

"Why can't we get out?" shrieked Mash Market Jake frantically. "Why can't we? Can't you handle her?"

"We're in a pocket," returned One-eyed Slade. "We can't beat out against it. We never could clear th' Roarin' Bulls to one side nor Raggedy Ann to the other. I tell yer we ain't got no sea room. If we go back through Hypercrite Channel an' miss our bearin's a little we're into Hue-'n'-cry Rocks. Ut's a hell-hole, an' I told yer when we come out here ut was a blasted graveyard in a blow."

An hour crept by. The electrical storm passed to sea, but the wind remained. There was no sign of its abating. The tide was rising swiftly. The low-lying strip of land which connected Raggedy Ann with the reef to the west was covered.

The surf on the outside was breaking on the rocks with a continuous mighty roar. Already far-flung and greedy tongues of water were lapping up among the crevices at the base of the old wreck. Soon the first streams of solid water would be finding their way in where Robert Wood and Blue Jean Billy lay. So short a time then and the work which Mash Market Jake had planned would be completed, and there would be no tongue to say just what had happened this night on Raggedy Ann.

The detective was struggling a little now. He was dimly aware that something seemed to be holding him. He was smothering; he couldn't move; his head was throbbing with a slow, heavy pain; he was breathing heavily—but slowly, very slowly, full consciousness was returning.

The girl was breathing more naturally. Though she had passed very close to the valley of death, she was far from being menaced by other than the rising

tide. Her brain cleared less quickly than did that of the man who was bound beside her.

For what seemed a long time to him, Robert Wood lay with his eyes open, striving to set things right in his brain. Where was he? What was that continual roar? What was it that had happened to him? He went back a long way and traced his movements.

He had left the city and gone out to Dilldock's Island, and then—— Yes, and then he had started fishing—lobstering with Gill. For many nights he and Gill had sat up till midnight braiding lobster trap heads. He remembered that distinctly. Old Cap Otis used to come in and sit with them, always talking of the sea. Cap was a little bit off upstairs; he had queer notions about things. But what a weather prophet he was. He could smell a storm twenty-four hours away.

Then, with a swift rush, there came other and more recent details of things flooding into the mind of the detective. The night he had stolen out to Raggedy Ann. Why, when was that? It—it seemed a long time ago, but was it? There had been strange, grim happenings—a girl, Blue Jean Billy Race, the outlaw woman, crumpled up there on the shore. He had tried to help her; then a boat came, but here it was that everything seemed to fade.

Stubbornly he began all over again, but this time he had progressed but a little way when at once his brain seemed to clear entirely. He tried to move, this time in earnest, but it was no use. He was tied, and tied tight.

"Now ain't this a fine note?" he muttered half aloud.

A faint spray of salt water from somewhere far outside of his ken fell on his face. After a little there came another. Close beyond he heard a boiling rush of a wave; then the lap and gurgle of its return.

Suddenly a cold, grim fear clutched him. In a twinkling he realized the possibilities of his plight. He was bound and helpless, square in the path of the rising tide. Then quickly his thoughts turned to the girl. What had become of her? Was she dead? Had they taken her away; or was she bound like himself in the path of the oncoming sea?

With a strength born of desperation he fought to free himself, but Mash Market Jake had performed his task well. After five minutes of struggling, Robert Wood had not so much as gained a bit of slack.

He rested for a little; then he spoke the girl's name.

"Blue Jean! Blue Jean Billy!"

He thought that he heard a movement—breathing—a tiny moan, somewhere very close. He waited a little; then spoke again:

"Blue Jean Billy Race!"

It came faintly, weakly; nevertheless it was a reply:

"Yes."

"Blue Jean, where are you?"

"He—here!"

"Where?"

"Just here. I—I can't move."

"What has happened?"

"I don't hardly know. Is that you, Shanghai?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"Robert Wood."

"The dick?"

"Yes."

A long silence followed. At length the man asked: "Are you tied?"

"I—I seem to be. Something is wrong; I can't move."

"Are you hurt badly?"

"I—I don't think so. I think I must have been shot in the head."

The detective swore half to himself. "My soul! Shot in the head and not hurt badly!" In a minute he went on: "Do you know where we are?"

"Where are we?"

"As near as I can discover we are tied beside the keel of the old wreck on the reef. The tide must be coming. Within an hour the water will be over us."

"There must be a storm," the girl said after a little. "I can hear the wind now. The water will come quickly; I can hear it very close, but it is better than arrest. I don't know how you happened to come; the last I remember Shanghai was trying to get out to the *Nix* and I—I was holding off Mash Market Jake and Jackstraw Billy and—and somebody else."

A small torrent of water, flung farther up the rock than any before it, swished about the feet of Robert Wood. Then came a smother of spume, pelting in between the massive frames and through ragged holes in the lower structure of the hull.

Again the detective fought with his bonds, wrenching, twisting, but to no avail. "I can't make it," he said.

"I'm sorry for you," the girl murmured slowly. "But if you get free you will take me—and I had rather take my sentence out here on Raggedy Ann. I've loved it for a long time."

Followed a long interval of silence. Neither spoke. The thunder of the breakers and the whipping rush of the wind was terrific. Then, from somewhere above them, there came a new note, a human voice, raised in high command.

"By thunder!" exclaimed the detective exultantly. "I had forgotten. My poor old fuddled head. And but for old Cap Otis I never would have come out here. He gave me the idea when he set out in this direction late this afternoon. In the excitement of running into what I did, I never gave another thought to the siren of the rocks he used to mention, or of the captain of the lost ship. And now, praise God, if I can make him hear me!"

"I don't believe he will leave the bridge till the storm has passed," said the girl.

But already Robert Wood was calling. Between each boom of a breaker and in those moments when there came an instant's lull, the detective shouted with all his might. Seemingly, however, either the "skipper," there on the bridge of his vessel, did not hear, or he feared for the safety of his ship in other and phantom hands.

Half an hour crept by. Robert Wood spoke occasionally a word of encouragement to the girl, but she did not answer.

The surge of the sea was very close now, sending its boiling and angry waters searching swiftly through the barren hulk. The deluge enveloped both the man and the woman; then slowly receded. Blue Jean made no movement; the detective shook himself, so far as his bonds would allow, and spat the salt water from his mouth.

There came a savage sweep of wind which seemed as though it would sweep the wreck into the sea.

"Pipe all hands on deck to shorten sail!" Shrill and penetrating came the command from the skipper of the lost ship.

Desperately Robert Wood raised his voice for another try before it was too late. A few more of those ever-increasing floods of water, and he would be unable to call. His heart failed within him. He spoke again to the girl.

"Blue Jean," he said, "can you hear me now?"

"Yes," came the faint reply: "I—I hear."

"I guess it's going to be a tie score, Billy Race. Gee! But you're game! Shall I say good-by?"

"Shake, Robert Wood," came the faint, tremulous reply. "You always played it——"

Another wave rushed across the reef and the girl's words were lost in a smother of white foam, but in a moment she resumed bravely:

"Played it square. No hard feeling. I—I guess it's good-by——"

Suddenly there was a rush of stumbling feet and a huge bulk loomed above Robert Wood.

"Brought ye aboard in irons, did they? Shanghaied ye, eh? Well, look alive, me hearty! We need ye in the riggin'; she's going to blow a hurricane,

I'm afeared. We got to put 'er under the storm sta's'ls. M'be ye're a 'bear' "—green hand—"but ye got to have your claws cut some'rs. Aloft with ye!"

A huge clasp knife flashed, and, even in the midst of another rush of flooding waters, Robert Wood of the International found himself free. He stumbled to his feet, slipped, sprawled headlong, and once more steadied himself against another surge of the sea.

He turned to the skipper of the ghost ship, but the man was gone. He had hurried back to his bridge of make-believe high up on the barren timbers.

Desperately the detective fought at the bonds which held the girl. Twice, sullen, relentless seas beat in upon them, but at last the lashings, grown terribly tight as the water shrunk the hemp strands, were loosened, and the man was able to set the girl free.

She was limp and helpless, though breathing softly. With a kind of strange exultation Robert Wood worked his way up to a point of safety above the seething flood, where he made Blue Jean as comfortable as the circumstances would allow.

At a higher point the detective could discern the dim outline of the old captain, still at his post on the bridge that his crumbling brain painted there, still at the wheel of his lost ship—the haunt of Raggedy Ann.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE VALLEY OF LIFE

A NEW day boomed into existence from the east, and the storm abated. Bright and fresh in the light of the rising sun was Raggedy Ann, while high on the bit of greensward which crowned this strange island were a man and a woman—Robert Wood, the detective, and Blue Jean Billy Race, the outlaw woman of yesterday.

Crumpled at the base of a cliff to the south lay all that was left of the *Nix*. In one of the small huts on the western side of the island lay a figure shrouded in a piece of sailcloth.

Far in past Hue-and-cry Rocks, in the shallow water of the Great Faun Bar, a mast canted rakishly some dozen feet or more above the ebb water. It was the grave of the mysterious sloop that so few hours ago had slipped silently out to the deep water off old Kettle Bottom. Of those who had manned her, the sea had taken its toll.

From a niche of the wreck on the reef of Raggedy Ann the grizzled, unkempt veteran of the deep worked his dory free and, in spite of the heavy sea that still was running, launched his boat in time to work his way home to Ginny Village with the flooding tide at his back.

Weak, her wounds swathed in crude bandages, but still very much alive, Blue Jean Billy sat staring down across what had been her tiny domain.

A little nearer the edge of a cliff which overlooked the cove below, Robert Wood stood.

Since their ordeal in the hull of the old wreck very few words had passed between them. The girl was the first to break the silence now.

"I suppose," she said quietly, "that I am under arrest?"

The detective did not reply at once. At length he turned slowly toward her.

"I should say, were I the judge," he said, "that you were entitled to considerable leniency. I—I believe I would put you on probation. You have visited the shores of society and humbled its pride and stripped it of considerable money, to say nothing of some very precious trinkets. It has all been lost to you."

"Yes," murmured the girl soberly, "it is gone, and I am glad. Much has been lost to me to-night—the pawns I played for, the *Nix,* and the *Nix's Mate*—and, poor old Shanghai."

Her eyes suddenly grew moist.

"Right to the end he was fighting for me, keeping the pledge he gave my father years ago. One request I want to make, no matter what you do with me, see that the brave pal of my underworld days is buried quietly somewhere on the mainland, for he always hated the sea, and it was only to guard me that he remained on Raggedy Ann so long."

"You have pretty well severed your last connecting link with the underworld, Blue Jean?" suggested the detective.

"Yes," she said slowly, "forever."

"And I," said Robert Wood, "have found that for

the present there is a pile of fun and considerable profit in lobstering with Gill, back up there in Ginny Village. I think we can call the case annulled."

He went over and stood before the girl. For a long time she did not look up. At last she met his gaze. Her eyes were moist still, but tears of gladness shone there now.

"We traveled together close into the valley of the shadow of death," said Robert Wood gently. "Could you—do you think, in time, perhaps that you would care to travel the valley of life with me somewhere down the lanes of the world?"

"Yes," said Blue Jean softly.

THE END

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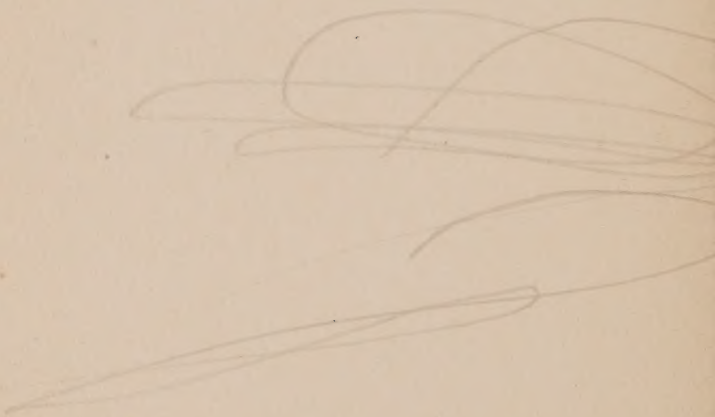
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